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AGAINST THE FALL OF *Night*

A Novel of the Future

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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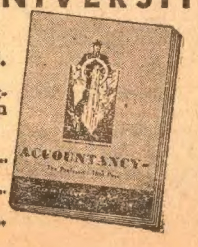

THIRTY-TWO ADDITIONAL PAGES IN THIS ISSUE!

STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 18, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION November, 1948

A Complete Novel

Against the Fall of Night

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

From the Lotosland prison of a dying world an atavistic youth strikes out for the stars and the glory that all mankind has long forsaken! 11

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Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "Against the Fall of Night"

STARTLING STORIES. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago 39, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 22, 1946, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In corresponding with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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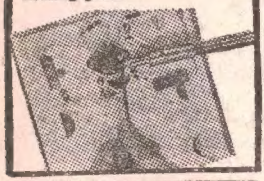

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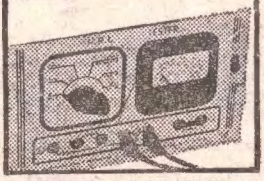

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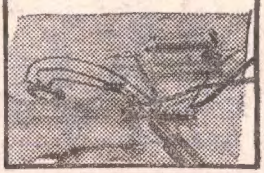

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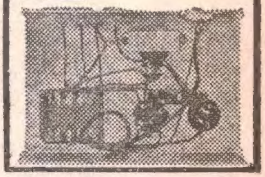

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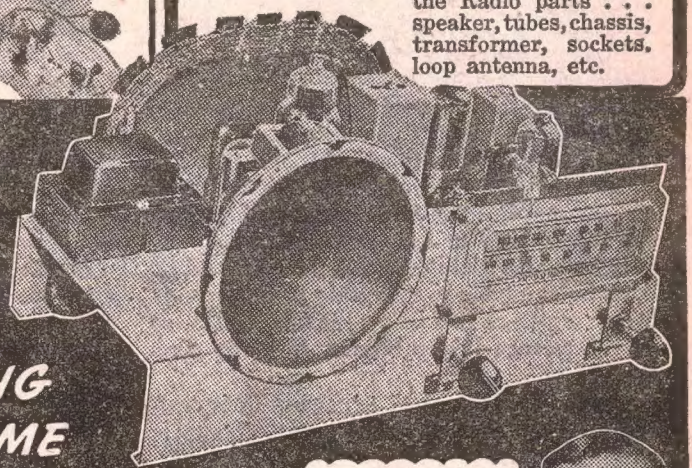

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WELL, hot on the heels of our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, which took a similar jump in size in October, STARTLING STORIES with this issue adds 32 pages for the second time within nine months. As is quickly apparent to anyone scanning the contents page, this increase in size not only permits us to run more stories but better ones.

Not only does this mean an added department and more variety of stories enabling the reader to take his pick, but it permits an almost complete overhaul of the HALL OF FAME feature. We have been restricted to shorter efforts in our selection of these fine old stories due to lack of space, have unavoidably used up our sources of supply, have been unable to run some of the magnificent novelets and short novels which so stirred science fiction readers in years gone by.

In this issue, however, with THE ISOTOPE MEN by Festus Pragnell, and in January, with Alexander M. Phillips' MARTIAN GESTURE, the removal of past restrictions should be quickly evident to all. The old timers, even more than today's authors, needed space to move around in at top form and from now on you'll be seeing them at an even better best than we've been able to show you in the past.

Furthermore, by way of indication that increased quantity means improved quality, we take considerable pride in the first appearance in the pages of STARTLING STORIES of A. E. van Vogt, perhaps the most celebrated of living stf authors, whose brilliant short story, DORMANT, graces these pages. All in all, we feel that the improvements are well worth the extra nickel SS now costs.

THE AGE OF SPEED

Now that mankind, through the medium of the United States Air Force, has cracked the so-called sonic barrier of approximately 760 miles per hour it seems a goodly time to sit down and do a little meditating on speed. How fast will men be able to transport themselves? How will speeds far greater than those attained today affect men involved? How fast will man ultimately be able to travel? These are a few of the questions that pop readily to mind.

Well, some of the answers, it seems probable, lie in the past. A trifle over a century ago, when the first railroads were winding their erratic ways across the country, leading scientists expressed grave doubts as to the ability of the human system to withstand sustained speeds of more than 30 miles per hour.

It was feared that the effect of air resistance upon the human mind and body at higher velocities might well be fatal—with death and/or insanity the result. It is interesting to note that 30 miles per hour is just about the speed of a galloping horse—unless the beast's name is Man of War or Citation or maybe Seabiscuit. In other words, two miles a minute was about as fast as man had traveled in pre-steam engine days.

Beyond that lay the unknown with all its terrors and the prophets of doom were free to imagine their worst. They did, as they have always done in like circumstances.

Mile-a-Minute Era

Of course, once the locomotive proved comparatively harmless to those who chose to travel by rail, these prophets of doom simply stepped up their estimates. For at least a half century after the coming of the choo-choo sixty miles per hour was considered a crashingly tremendous speed.

Whenever a novelist wanted to introduce a note of cataclysm into his work (and the same went for journalists of the day) he had something heading toward perdition at an appalling mile-a-minute pace. And for de-

(Continued on page 8)

To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard . . .

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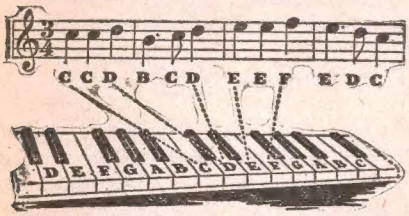

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

cades readers shuddered as they were supposed to.

Then, with improved roadbeds and locomotives, the railroads, headed by the famed Twentieth Century Limited in this country and the Royal Scot in England, began to make the mile-a-minute mark look silly. The automobile came along at about that time and added its own concept of ever-greater speed. The prophets of speed-doom were out on a limb for awhile with no deadline to issue warnings about.

For just about the time they decided on two miles per minutes as the utmost speed a human being could stand the airplane came along and cracked that one—to be followed by the increasingly fast automobile.

Speed of Sound

So our friends, the prophets, took a good long leap for themselves and picked on the speed of sound—approximately 760 miles per hour at sea level. This, they figured, was a figure which humanity would not soon be able to crack.

They were aided in this concept by the fact that holding a plane together against the vagaries of air resistance at such a velocity involved structural problems that for some years had the designers in a tizzy.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War Two, a stripped-down German Messerschmitt-109 attained a speed of 465 miles per hour, was matched later by fully-loaded fighter planes of many nationalities. And the war stepped up research and production equipment so that designers were able to do the groundwork which has enabled them to crack the so-called "sonic" barrier.

Jet-propelled planes, faster far than the standard internal-combustion-driven variety until then in use, were evolved by 1944 and have since moved a long way toward supplanting their predecessors. And now it has been announced that the rocket-driven XS-1, an experimental AAF plane, has been cracking the speed of sound right along—and without casualties to the men aboard her.

Already, with the V-2 rocket and various sorts of large projectiles, man has far surpassed the speed of sound—his unmanned projectiles attaining velocities up to almost

(Continued on page 149)

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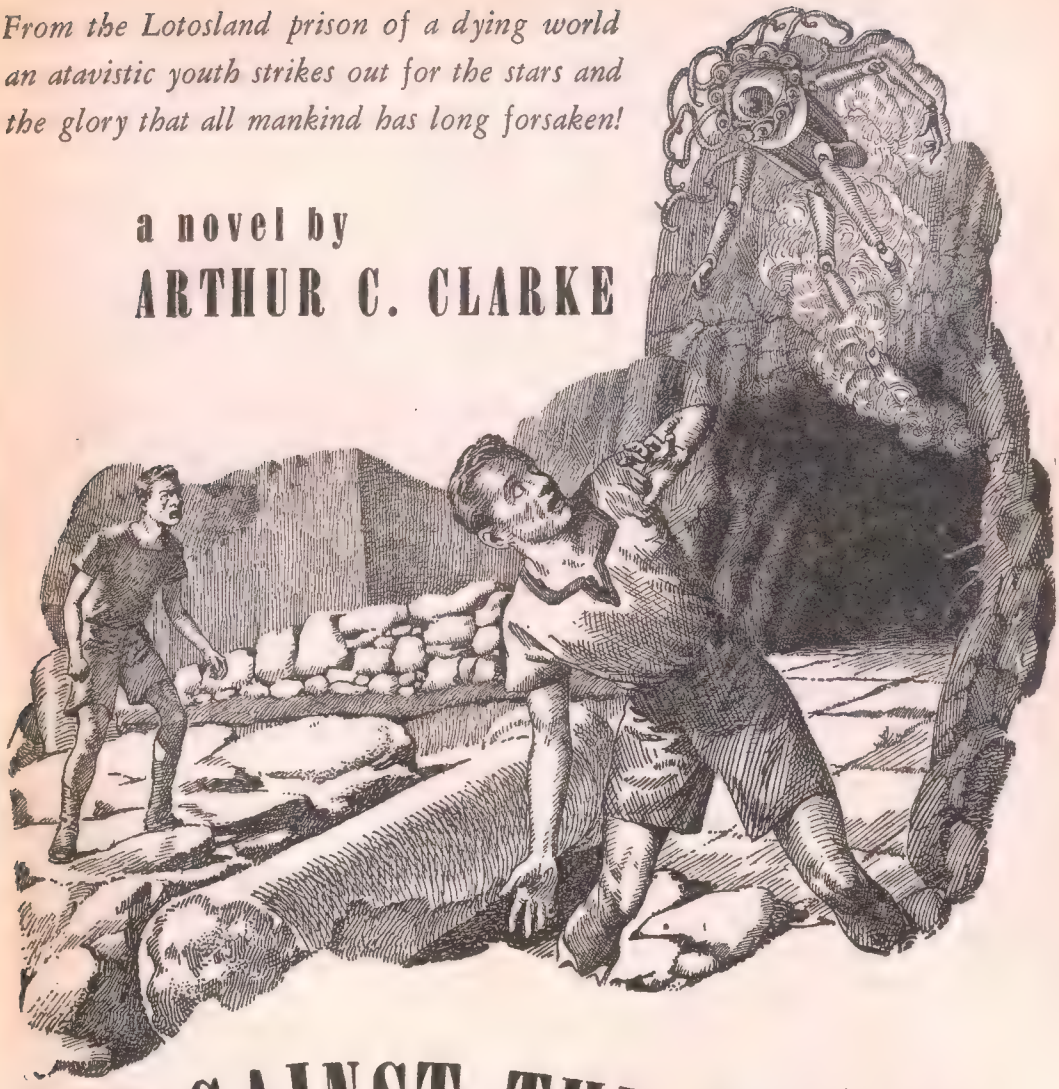
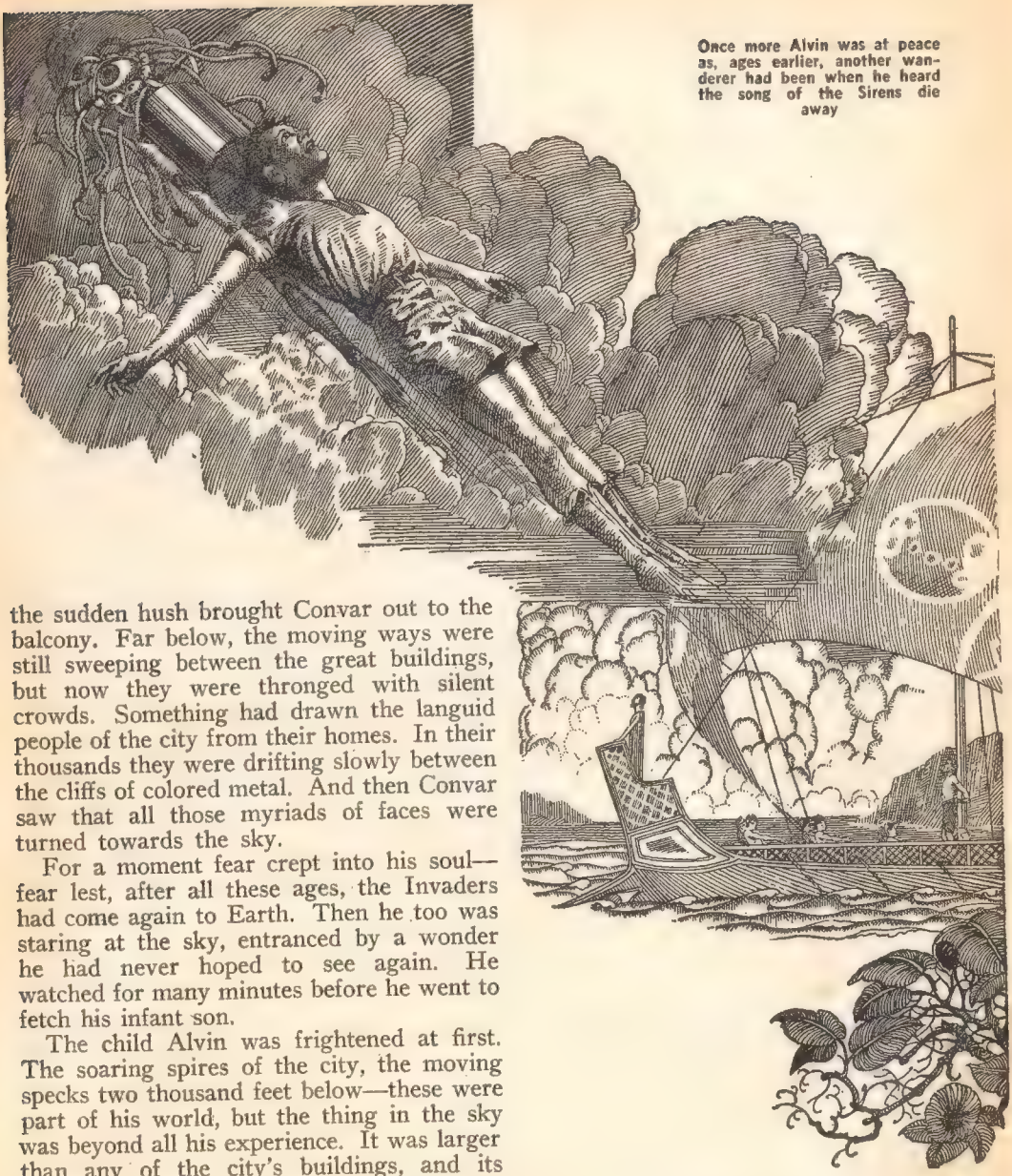


AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT

PROLOGUE

NOT once in a generation did the voice of the city change as it was changing now. Day and night, age after age, it had never faltered. To myriads of men it had been the first and the last sound they had ever heard. It was part of the city—when it ceased the city would be dead and the desert sands would be settling in the great streets of Diaspar.

Even here, half a mile above the ground,



Once more Alvin was at peace as, ages earlier, another wanderer had been when he heard the song of the Sirens die away

the sudden hush brought Convar out to the balcony. Far below, the moving ways were still sweeping between the great buildings, but now they were thronged with silent crowds. Something had drawn the languid people of the city from their homes. In their thousands they were drifting slowly between the cliffs of colored metal. And then Convar saw that all those myriads of faces were turned towards the sky.

For a moment fear crept into his soul—fear lest, after all these ages, the Invaders had come again to Earth. Then he too was staring at the sky, entranced by a wonder he had never hoped to see again. He watched for many minutes before he went to fetch his infant son.

The child Alvin was frightened at first. The soaring spires of the city, the moving specks two thousand feet below—these were part of his world, but the thing in the sky was beyond all his experience. It was larger than any of the city's buildings, and its whiteness was so dazzling that it hurt the eye. Though it seemed to be solid the restless winds were changing its outlines even as he watched.

Once, Alvin knew, the skies of Earth had been filled with strange shapes. Out of space the great ships had come, bearing unknown treasures, to berth at the Port of Diaspar. But that was half a billion years ago. Before the beginning of history the Port had been buried by the drifting sand.

Convar's voice was sad when presently he spoke to his son.

"Look at it well, Alvin," he said. "It may be the last the world will ever know. I have only seen one other in all my life and once they filled the skies of Earth."

They watched in silence, and with them all the thousands in the streets and towers,

of Diaspar, until the last cloud slowly faded from sight, sucked dry by the hot, parched air of the unending deserts.

CHAPTER I

The Prison of Diaspar

THE lesson was finished. The drowsy whisper of the hypnone rose suddenly in pitch and ceased abruptly on a thrice-repeated note of command. Then the machine blurred and vanished, but still Alvin sat staring into nothingness while his mind slipped back through the ages to meet reality again.

Jeserac was the first to speak. His voice was worried and a little uncertain.

"Those are the oldest records in the world, Alvin—the only ones that show Earth as it was before the Invaders came. Very few people indeed have ever seen them."

Slowly the boy turned towards his tutor.

There was something in his eyes that worried the old man and once again Jeserac regretted his action. He began to talk quickly, as if trying to set his own conscience at ease.

"You know that we never talk about the

ancient times, and I only showed you those records because you were so anxious to see them. Don't let them upset you: as long as we're happy, does it matter how much of the world we occupy? The people you have been watching had more space, but they were less contented than we."

Was that true? Alvin wondered. He thought once more of the desert lapping 'round the island that was Diaspar and his mind returned to the world that Earth had been. He saw again the endless leagues of blue water, greater than the land itself, rolling their waves against golden shores. His ears were still ringing with the boom of breakers stilled these thousand million years. And he remembered the forests and prairies, and the strange beasts that had once shared the world with Man.

ALL this was gone. Of the oceans, nothing remained but the grey deserts of salt, the winding sheets of Earth. Salt and sand, from Pole to Pole, with only the lights of Diaspar burning in the wilderness that must one day overwhelm them.

And these were the least of the things that Man had lost, for above the desolation the forgotten stars were shining still.

"Jeserac," said Alvin at last, "once I went to the Tower of Loranne. No one lives there anymore and I could look out over the desert. It was dark and I couldn't see the ground, but the sky was full of colored lights. I watched them for a long time, but they never moved. So presently I came away. Those were the stars, weren't they?"

Jeserac was alarmed. Exactly how Alvin had got to the Tower of Loranne was a matter for further investigation. The boy's interests were becoming—dangerous.

"Those were the stars," he answered briefly. "What of them?"

"We used to visit them once, didn't we?"

A long pause. Then, "Yes."

"Why did we stop? What *were* the Invaders?"

Jeserac rose to his feet. His answer echoed back through all the teachers the world had ever known.

"That's enough for one day, Alvin. Later, when you are older, I'll tell you more—but not now. You already know too much."

Alvin never asked the question again. Later he had no need, for the answer was clear. And there was so much in Diaspar to beguile the mind that for months he could forget that strange yearning he alone seemed to feel.

Diaspar was a world in itself. Here Man had gathered all his treasures, everything that had been saved from the ruin of the past. All the cities that had ever been had given something to Diaspar. Even before the coming of the Invaders its name had been known on the worlds that Man had lost.

Into the building of Diaspar had gone all the skill, all the artistry of the Golden Ages. When the great days were coming to an end, men of genius had remolded the city and given it the machines that made it immortal. Whatever might be forgotten, Diaspar would live and bear the descendants of Man safely down the stream of Time.

They were, perhaps, as contented as any race the world had known and after their fashion they were happy. They spent their long lives amid beauty that had never been surpassed, for the labor of millions of centuries had been dedicated to the glory of Diaspar.

This was Alvin's world, a world which for ages had been sinking into a gracious decadence. Of this Alvin was still unconscious, for the present was so full of wonder that it was easy to forget the past. There was so much to do, so much to learn before the long centuries of his youth ebbed away.

Music had been the first of the arts to attract him and for a while he had experimented with many instruments. But this most ancient of all arts was now so complex that it might take a thousand years for him to master all its secrets and in the end he abandoned his ambitions. He could listen, but he could never create.

FOR a long time the thought-converter gave him great delight. On its screen he shaped endless patterns of form and color, usually copies—deliberate or otherwise—of the ancient masters. More and more frequently he found himself creating dream landscapes from the vanished Dawn World and often his thoughts turned wistfully to the records that Jeserac had shown him.

So the smouldering flame of his discontent burned slowly towards the level of consciousness, though as yet he was scarcely worried by the vague restlessness he often felt.

But through the months and the years, that restlessness was growing. Once Alvin had been content to share the pleasures and

interests of Diaspar, but now he knew that they were not sufficient. His horizons were expanding and the knowledge that all his life must be bounded by the walls of the city was becoming intolerable to him. Yet he knew well enough that there was no alternative, for the wastes of the desert covered all the world.

He had seen the desert only a few times in his life, but he knew no one else who had ever seen it at all. His people's fear of the

ALVIN OF LORONEI

outer world was something he could not understand. To him it held no terror but only mystery. When he was weary of Diaspar it called to him as it was calling now.

The moving ways were glittering with life and color as the people of the city went about their affairs. They smiled at Alvin as he worked his way to the central high-speed section. Sometimes they greeted him by name. Once it had been flattering to think that he was known to the whole of Diaspar, but now it gave him little pleasure.

In minutes the express channel had swept him away from the crowded heart of the city and there were few people in sight when it came to a smooth halt against a long platform of brightly colored marble. The moving ways were so much a part of his life that Alvin had never imagined any other form of transport.

An engineer of the ancient world would have gone slowly mad trying to understand how a solid roadway could be fixed at both ends while its center traveled at a hundred miles an hour. One day Alvin might be puzzled too, but for the present he accepted his environment as uncritically as all the other citizens of Diaspar.

This area of the city was almost deserted. Although the population of Diaspar had not altered for millenia it was the custom for families to move at frequent intervals. One day the tide of life would sweep this way again, but the great towers had been lonely now for a hundred thousand years.

The marble platform ended against a wall pierced with brilliantly lighted tunnels. Alvin selected one without hesitation and stepped into it. The peristaltic field seized him at once and propelled him forward while he lay back luxuriously, watching his surroundings.

It no longer seemed possible that he was in a tunnel far underground. The art that had used all Diaspar for its canvas had been busy here and above Alvin the skies seemed open to the winds of heaven. All around were the spires of the city, gleaming in the sunlight.

It was not the city as he knew it, but the Diaspar of a much earlier age. Although most of the great buildings were familiar, there were subtle differences that added to the interest of the scene. Alvin wished he could linger, but he had never found any way of retarding his progress through the tunnel.

All too soon he was gently set down in a large elliptical chamber, completely surrounded by windows. Through these he could catch tantalizing glimpses of gardens ablaze with brilliant flowers. There were gardens still in Diaspar, but these had existed only in the mind of the artist who conceived them. Certainly there were no such flowers as these in the world today.

Alvin stepped through one of the windows—and the illusion was shattered. He was in a circular passageway, curving steeply upwards. Beneath his feet the floor began to creep slowly forward, as if eager to lead him to his goal. He walked a few paces until his speed was so great that further effort

would be wasted.

The corridor still inclined upwards and and in a few hundred feet had curved through a complete right-angle. But only logic knew this. To the senses it was now as if one were being hurried along an absolutely level corridor. The fact that he was in reality traveling up a vertical shaft thousands of feet deep gave Alvin no sense of insecurity, for a failure of the polarising field was unthinkable.

Presently the corridor began to slope "downwards" again until once more it had turned through a right angle. The movement of the floor slowed imperceptibly until it came to rest at the end of a long hall lined with mirrors. Alvin was now, he knew, almost at the summit of the Tower of Loranne.

He lingered for a while in the hall of mirrors, for it had a fascination that was unique. There was nothing like it, as far as Alvin knew, in the rest of Diaspar. Through some whim of the artist, only a few of the mirrors reflected the scene as it really was—and even those, Alvin was convinced, were constantly changing their position.

The rest certainly reflected *something*, but it was faintly disconcerting to see oneself walking amid everchanging and quite imaginary surroundings. Alvin wondered what he would do if he saw anyone else approaching him in the mirror-world, but so far the situation had never arisen.

Five minutes later he was in a small bare room through which a warm wind blew continually. It was part of the tower's ventilating system and the moving air escaped through a series of wide openings that pierced the wall of the building. Through them one could get a glimpse of the world beyond Diaspar.

IT WAS perhaps too much to say that Diaspar had been deliberately built so that its inhabitants could see nothing of the outer world. Yet it was strange that from nowhere else in the city, as far as Alvin knew, could one see the desert.

The outermost towers of Diaspar formed a wall around the city, turning their backs upon the hostile world beyond, and Alvin thought again of his people's strange reluctance to speak or even to think of anything outside their little universe.

Thousands of feet below the sunlight was taking leave of the desert. The almost horizontal rays made a pattern of light against the eastern wall of the little room, and Alvin's own shadow loomed enormous behind him. He shaded his eyes against the glare and peered down at the land upon which no man had walked for unknown ages.

There was little to see: only the long shadows of the sand dunes and, far to the west, the low range of broken hills beyond which the sun was setting. It was strange to think that, of all the millions of living men, he alone had seen this sight.

There was no twilight. With the going of the sun night swept like a wind across the desert, scattering the stars before it. High in the south burned a strange formation that had puzzled Alvin before—a perfect circle of six colored stars with a single white giant at its center. Few other stars had such brilliance, for the great suns that had once burned so fiercely in the glory of youth were now guttering to their doom.

For a long time Alvin knelt at the opening, watching the stars fall towards the west. Here in the glimmering darkness, high above the city, his mind seemed to be working with a supernormal clarity. There were still tremendous gaps in his knowledge, but slowly the problem of Diaspar was beginning to reveal itself.

The human race had changed—and he had not. Once the curiosity and the desire for knowledge which cut him off from the rest of his people had been shared by all the world. Far back in time, millions of years ago, something must have happened that had changed mankind completely. Those unexplained references to the Invaders—did the answer lie there?

It was time he returned. As he rose to leave, Alvin was suddenly struck by a thought that had never occurred to him before. The air-vent was almost horizontal and perhaps a dozen feet long. He had always imagined that it ended in the sheer wall of the tower, but this was a pure assumption.

There were, he realized now, several other possibilities. Indeed, it was more than likely that there would be a ledge of some kind beneath the opening if only for reasons of safety. It was too late to do any exploring now, but tomorrow he would come again.

He was sorry to have to lie to Jeserac, but if the old man disapproved of his eccentricities it was only kindness to conceal the truth. Exactly what he hoped to discover, Alvin

could not have said. He knew perfectly well that, if by any means he succeeded in leaving Diaspar, he would soon have to return. But the schoolboy excitement of a possible adventure was its own justification.

It was not difficult to work his way along the tunnel, though he could not have done it easily a year before. The thought of a sheer five-thousand-foot drop at the end worried Alvin not at all, for man had completely lost his fear of heights. And, in fact, the drop was only a matter of a yard onto a wide terrace running right and left athwart the face of the tower.

Alvin scrambled out into the open, the blood pounding in his veins. Before him, no longer framed in a narrow rectangle of stone, lay the whole expanse of the desert. Above, the face of the tower still soared hundreds of feet into the sky. The neighboring buildings stretched away to north and south, an avenue of titans.

The Tower of Loranne, Alvin noted with interest, was not the only one with air-vents opening towards the desert. For a moment he stood drinking in the tremendous landscape. Then he began to examine the ledge on which he was standing.

It was perhaps twenty feet wide and ended abruptly in a sheer drop to the ground. Alvin, gazing fearlessly over the edge of the precipice, judged that the desert was at least a mile below. There was no hope in that direction.

Far more interesting was the fact that a flight of steps led down from one end of the terrace, apparently to another ledge a few hundred feet below. The steps were cut in the sheer face of the building and Alvin wondered if they led all the way to the surface. It was an exciting posibility. In his enthusiasm, he overlooked the physical implications of a five-thousand-foot descent.

But the stairway was little more than a hundred feet long. It came to a sudden end against a great block of stone that seemed to have been welded across it. There was no way past: deliberately and thoroughly the route had been barred.

Alvin approached the obstacle with a sinking heart. He had forgotten the sheer impossibility of climbing a stairway a mile high, if indeed he could have completed the descent, and he felt a baffled annoyance at having come so far only to meet with failure.

He reached the stone, and for the first time saw the message engraved upon it. The letters were archaic, but he could decipher them easily enough. Three times he read the simple inscription; then he sat down on the great stone slabs and gazed at the inaccessible land below:

THERE IS A BETTER WAY.
GIVE MY GREETINGS TO THE KEEPER OF THE RECORDS.

—Alaine of Lyndar.

CHAPTER II

Start of the Search

RORDEN, Keeper of the Records, concealed his surprise when his visitor announced himself. He recognized Alvin at once and even as the boy was entering had punched out his name on the information machine. Three seconds later Alvin's personal card was lying in his hand.

According to Jeserac, the duties of the Keeper of the Records were somewhat obscure, but Alvin had expected to find him in the heart of an enormous filing system. He had also—for no reason at all—expected to meet someone quite as old as Jeserac. Instead, he found a middle-aged man in a single room containing perhaps a dozen large machines. Apart from a few papers strewn across the desk there were no records of any kind to be seen.

Rorden's greeting was somewhat absent-minded, for he was surreptitiously studying Alvin's card.

"Alaine of Lyndar?" he said. "No, I've never heard of him. But we can soon find who he was."

Alvin watched with interest while he punched a set of keys on one of the machines. Almost immediately there came the glow of a synthesizer field and a slip of paper materialized.

"Alaine seems to have been a predecessor of mine—a *very* long time ago. I thought I knew all the Keepers for the last hundred million years, but he must have been before that. It's so long ago that only his name has been recorded, with no other details at all. Where was that inscription?"

"In the Tower of Loranne," said Alvin after a moment's hesitation.

Another set of keys was punched, but this time the field did not reappear and no paper materialized.

"What are you doing?" asked Alvin. "Where *are* all your records?"

The Keeper laughed.

"That always puzzles people. It would be impossible to keep written records of all the information we need. It's recorded electrically and automatically erased after a certain time unless there's a special reason for preserving it. If Alaine left any message for posterity we'll soon discover it."

"How?"

"There's no one in the world who could tell you that. All I know is that this machine is an Associator. If you give it a set of facts it will hunt through the sum total of human knowledge until it correlates them."

"Doesn't that take a lot of time?"

"Very often. I have sometimes had to wait twenty years for an answer. So won't you sit down?" he added, the crinkles round his eyes belying his solemn voice.

Alvin had never met anyone quite like the Keeper of the Records and he decided that he liked him. He was tired of being reminded that he was a boy and it was pleasant to be treated as a real person.

Once again the synthesizer field flickered and Rorden bent down to read the slip. The message must have been a long one, for it took him several minutes to finish it. Finally he sat down on one of the room's couches, looking at his visitor with eyes which, as Alvin noticed for the first time, were of a most disconcerting shrewdness.

"What does it say?" he burst out at last, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

Rorden did not reply. Instead, he was the one to ask for information.

"Why do you want to leave Diaspar?" he said quietly.

If Jeserac or his father had asked him that question Alvin would have found himself floundering in a morass of half-truths or downright lies. But with this man, whom he had known for only a few minutes, there seemed none of the barriers that had cut him off from those he had known all his life.

"I'm not sure," he said, speaking slowly but readily. "I've always felt like this. There's nothing outside Diaspar, I know—but I want to go there all the same."

He looked shyly at Rorden as if expecting encouragement, but the Keeper's eyes were far away. When at last he again turned to Alvin, there was an expression on his face that the boy could not fully understand. It held a tinge of sadness that was somewhat disturbing.

No one could have known that Rorden had come to the greatest crisis in his life. For thousands of years he had carried out his duties as the interpreter of the machines, duties requiring little initiative or enterprise.

Somewhat apart from the tumult of the city, rather aloof from his fellows, Rorden had lived a happy and contented life. And now this boy had come, disturbing the ghosts of an age that had been dead for millions of centuries and threatening to shatter his cherished peace of mind.

A FEW words of discouragement would be enough to destroy the threat, but looking into the anxious, unhappy eyes, Rorden knew that he could never take the easy way. Even without the message from Alaine, his conscience would have forbidden it.

"Alvin," he began, "I know there are many things that have been puzzling you. Most of all, I expect, you have wondered why we now live here in Diaspar when once the whole world was not enough for us."

Alvin nodded, wondering how the other could have read his mind so accurately.

"Well, I'm afraid I cannot answer that question completely. Don't look so disappointed—I haven't finished yet. It all started when Man was fighting the Invaders—whoever or whatever they were. Before that he had been expanding through the stars, but he was driven back to Earth in wars of which we have no conception.

"Perhaps that defeat changed his character and made him content to pass the rest of his existence on Earth. Or perhaps the Invaders promised to leave him in peace if he would remain on his own planet. We don't know. All that is certain is that he started to develop an intensely centralized culture of which Diaspar was the final expression.

"At first there were many of the great cities, but in the end Diaspar absorbed them all, for there seems to be some force driving men together as once it drove them to the stars. Few people ever recognize its presence, but we all have a fear of the outer world and a longing for what is known and understood. That fear may be irrational or it may have some foundation in history, but it is one of the strongest forces in our lives."

"Then why don't I feel that way?"

"You mean that the thought of leaving Diaspar, where you have everything you need and are among all your friends, doesn't fill you with something like horror?"

"No."

The Keeper smiled wryly.

"I'm afraid I cannot say the same. But at least I can appreciate your point of view, even if I cannot share it. Once I might have felt doubtful about helping you, but not now that I've seen Alaine's message."

"You still haven't told me what it was!"

Rorden laughed.

"I don't intend to do so until you're a good deal older. But I'll tell you what it was about.

"Alaine foresaw that people like you would be born in future ages. He realized that they might attempt to leave Diaspar and he set out to help them. I imagine that whatever way you tried to leave the city, you would meet an inscription directing you to the Keeper of the Records.

"Knowing that the Keeper would then question his machines, Alaine left a message buried safely among the thousands and millions of records that exist. It could only be found if the Associator were deliberately looking for it. That message directs any Keeper to assist the inquirer, *even if he disapproves of his quest.* Alaine believed that the human race was becoming decadent and he wanted to help anyone who might regenerate it. Do you follow all this?"

Alvin nodded gravely and Rorden continued.

"I hope he was wrong. I don't believe that humanity is decadent—it's simply altered. You, of course, will agree with Alaine—but don't do so simply because you think it's fine to be different from everyone else! We are happy. If we have lost anything we're not aware of it.

"Alaine wrote a good deal in his message, but the important part is this—*'There are three ways out of Diaspar.'* He does not say where they lead nor does he give any clues as to how they can be found, though there are some very obscure references I'll have to think about.

"But even if what he says is true you are far too young to leave the city. Tomorrow I must speak to your people. No, I won't give you away! But leave me now—I have a good deal to think about."

Rorden felt a little embarrassed by the boy's gratitude. When Alvin had gone he sat for a while, wondering if, after all, he had acted rightly.

THERE was no doubt that the boy was an atavism—a throwback to the great ages. Every few generations there still appeared minds that were the equal of any the ancient days had known. Born out of their time, they could have little influence on the peacefully dreaming world of Diaspar.

The long slow decline of the human will was too far advanced to be checked by any individual genius, however brilliant. After a few centuries of restlessness the variants accepted their fate and ceased to struggle against it.

When Alvin understood his position, would he too realize that his only hope of happiness lay in conforming with the world? Rorden wondered if, after all, it might not have been kinder in the long run to discourage him. But it was too late now—Alaine had seen to that.

The ancient Keeper of the Records must have been a remarkable man, perhaps an atavism himself. How many times down the ages had other Keepers read that message of his and acted upon it for better or worse? Surely, if there had been any earlier cases, some record would have been made.

Rorden thought intently for a moment. Then, slowly at first but soon with mounting confidence, he began to put question after question to the machines until every Associator in the room was running at full capacity. By means now beyond the understanding of man, billions upon billions of facts were racing through the scrutinizers. There was nothing to do but to wait.

In after years Alvin was often to marvel at his good fortune. Had the Keeper of the Records been unfriendly his quest could never have begun. But Rorden, in spite of the years between them, shared something of his own curiosity.

In Rorden's case there was only the desire to uncover lost knowledge. He would never have used it, for he shared with the rest of Diaspar that dread of the outer world which Alvin found so strange. Close though their friendship became, that barrier was always to lie between them.

Alvin's life was now divided into two quite distinct portions. He continued his studies with Jeserac, acquiring the immense and intricate knowledge of people, places and cus-

toms without which no one could play any part in the life of the city.

Jeserac was a conscientious but a leisurely tutor and, with so many centuries before him, he felt no urgency in completing his task. He was, in fact, rather pleased that Alvin should have made friends with Rorden. The Keeper of the Records was regarded with some awe by the rest of Diaspar, for he alone had direct access to all the knowledge of the past.

How enormous and yet how incomplete that knowledge was, Alvin was slowly learning. In spite of the self-canceling circuits which obliterated all information as soon as it was obsolete, the main registers contained a hundred trillion facts at the smallest estimate. Whether there was any limit to the capacity of the machines Rorden did not know. That knowledge was lost with the secret of their operation.

The Associators were a source of endless wonder to Alvin, who would spend hours setting up questions on their keyboards. It was amusing to discover that people whose names began with "S" had a tendency to live in the eastern part of the city—though the machines hastened to add that the fact had no statistical significance.

Alvin quickly accumulated a vast array of similar useless facts which he employed to impress his friends. At the same time, under Rorden's guidance, he was learning all that was known to the Dawn Ages, for Rorden had insisted that it would need years of preparation before he could begin his quest.

Alvin recognized the truth of this, though he sometimes rebelled against it. But after a single attempt he abandoned any hope of acquiring knowledge prematurely.

He had been alone one day when Rorden was paying one of his rare visits to the administrative center of the city. The temptation had been too strong and he had ordered the Associators to hunt for Alaine's message.

When Rorden returned he found a very scared boy trying to discover why all the machines were paralyzed. To Alvin's immense relief Rorden had only laughed and punched a series of combinations that had cleared the jam. Then he turned to the culprit and tried to address him severely.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Alvin! I expected something like this, so I've blocked all the circuits I don't want you to explore. That block will remain until I think it's safe to lift it."

Alvin grinned sheepishly and said nothing. Thereafter he made no more excursions into forbidden realms.

CHAPTER III

The Tomb of Yarlan Zey

FOR three years Rorden made but casual references to the purpose of their work. The time had passed quickly enough, for there was so much to learn and the knowledge that his goal was not unattainable gave Alvin patience. Then, one day, when they were struggling to reconcile two conflicting maps of the ancient world, the main Associator suddenly began to call for attention.

Rorden hurried to the machine and returned with a long sheet of paper covered with writing. He ran through it quickly and looked at Alvin with a smile.

"We will soon know if the first way is still open," he said quietly.

Alvin jumped from his chair, scattering maps in all directions.

"Where is it?" he cried eagerly.

Rorden laughed and pushed him back into his seat.

"I haven't kept you waiting all this time because I wanted to," he said. "It's true that you were too young to leave Diaspar before, even if we knew how it could be done. But that's not the only reason why you had to wait.

"The day you came to see me, I set the machines searching through the records to discover if anyone after Alaine's time had tried to leave the city. I thought you might not be the first and I was right. There have been many others—the last was about fifteen million years ago. They've all been very careful to leave us no clues and I can see Alaine's influence there.

"In his message he stressed that only those who searched for themselves should be allowed to find the way, so I've had to explore many blind avenues. I knew that the secret had been hidden carefully—yet not so carefully that it couldn't be found.

"About a year ago I began to concentrate on the idea of transport. It was obvious that Diaspar must have had many links with the rest of the world and although the Port itself has been buried by the desert for ages

"Look at it well, Alvin," Convar said, "It may be the last cloud the world will know"

I thought that there might be other means of travel.

"Right at the beginning I found that the Associators would not answer direct questions. Alaine must have put a block on them just as I once did for your benefit. Unfortunately I can't remove Alaine's block, so I've had to use indirect methods.

"If there was an external transport system, there's certainly no trace of it now. Therefore, if it existed at all, it has been deliberately concealed. I set the Associators to investigate all the major engineering operations carried out in the city since the records begin.

"This is a report on the construction of the Central Park—*and Alaine has added a note to it himself.* As soon as it encountered his name, of course, the machine knew it had finished the search and called for me."

Rorden glanced at the paper as if rereading part of it again. Then he continued.

"We've always taken it for granted that all the moving ways should converge on the Park. It seems natural for them to do so. But this report states that the Park was built *after* the founding of the city—many millions of years later, in fact. *Therefore the moving ways once led to something else.*"

"An airport, perhaps?"

"No—flying was never allowed over any city except in very ancient times, before the moving ways were built. Even Diaspar is not as old as that! But listen to Alaine's note.

"'When the desert buried the Port of Diaspar the emergency system which had been built against that day was able to carry the remaining transport. It was finally closed down by Yarlan Zey, builder of the Park, having remained almost unused since the Migration.'"

Alvin looked rather puzzled.

"It doesn't tell me a great deal," he complained.

Rorden smiled. "You've been letting the Associators do too much thinking for you," he admonished gently. "Like all of Alaine's statements it's deliberately obscure lest the wrong people should learn from it. But I think it tells us quite enough. Doesn't the name 'Yarlan Zey' mean anything to you?"

"I think I understand," said Alvin slowly. "You're talking about the Monument?"

"Yes. It's in the exact center of the Park. If you produced the moving ways they would all meet there. *Perhaps, once upon a time, they did.*"

Alvin was already on his feet.

"Let's go and have a look," he exclaimed.

Rorden shook his head.

"You've seen the Tomb of Yarlan Zey a score of times and noticed nothing unusual about it. Before we rush off, don't you think it would be a good idea to question the machines again?"

ALVIN was forced to agree and while they were waiting began to read the report that the Associator had already produced.

"Rorden," he said at last, "what did Alaine mean when he spoke about the Migration?"

"It's a term often used in the very earliest records," answered Rorden. "It refers to the time when the other cities were decaying and all the human race was moving towards Diaspar."

"Then this 'emergency system', whatever it is, leads to them?"

"Almost certainly."

Alvin meditated for a while.

"So you think that, even if we do find the system, it will only lead to a lot of ruined cities?"

"I doubt if it will even do that," replied Rorden. "When they were deserted the machines were closed down and the desert will have covered them by now."

Alvin refused to be discouraged.

"But Alaine must have known that!" he protested. Rorden shrugged his shoulders.

"We're only guessing," he said, "and the Associator hasn't any information at the moment. It may take several hours, but with such a restricted subject we should have all the recorded facts before the end of the day. We'll follow your advice after all."

The screens of the city were down and the sun was shining fiercely, though its rays would have felt strangely weak to a man of the Dawn Ages. Alvin had made this journey a hundred times before, yet now it seemed almost a new adventure.

When they came to the end of the moving way he bent down and examined the surface that had carried them through the city. For the first time in his life he began to realize something of its wonder. Here it was motionless, yet a hundred yards away it was rushing directly towards him, faster than a man could run.

Rorden was watching him, but he misunderstood the boy's curiosity.

"When the park was built," he said, "I suppose they had to remove the last section of the way. I doubt if you'll learn anything from it."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Alvin. "I was wondering how the moving ways work."

Rorden looked astonished, for the thought had never occurred to him. Ever since men had lived in cities they had accepted without thinking the multitudinous services that lay beneath their feet. And when the cities had become completely automatic they had ceased even to notice that they were there.

"Don't worry about *that,*" he said. "I can show you a thousand greater puzzles. Tell me how my Recorders get their information, for example."

So, without a second thought, Rorden dismissed the moving ways—one of the greatest triumphs of human engineering. The long ages of research that had gone to the making of anisotropic matter meant nothing to him. Had he been told that a substance could have the properties of a solid in one dimension and of a liquid in the other two he would not even have registered surprise.

The Park was almost three miles across and, since every pathway was a curve of some kind, all distances were considerably exaggerated. When he had been younger Alvin had spent a great deal of time among the trees and plants of this largest of the city's open spaces.

He had explored the whole of it at one time or another, but in later years much of its charm had vanished. Now he understood why. He had seen the ancient records and knew that the Park was only a pale shadow of a beauty that had vanished from the world.

They met many people as they walked through the avenues of ageless trees and over the dwarf perennial grass that never needed trimming. After a while they grew tired of acknowledging greetings, for everyone knew Alvin and almost everyone knew the Keeper of the Records.

So they left the paths and wandered through quiet by-ways almost overshadowed by trees. Sometimes the trunks crowded so closely round them that the great towers of the city were hidden from sight and for a little while Alvin could imagine he was in the ancient world of which he had so often dreamed.

The Tomb of Yarlan Zey was the only building in the Park. An avenue of the eternal trees led up the low hill on which it stood, its rose-pink columns gleaming in the sunlight. The roof was open to the sky, and the single chamber was paved with great slabs of apparently natural stone.

But for geological ages human feet had crossed and recrossed that floor and left no trace upon its inconceivably stubborn material. Alvin and Rorden walked slowly into the chamber until they came face to face with the statue of Yarlan Zey.

THE creator of the great park sat with slightly downcast eyes, as if examining the plans spread across his knees. His face wore that curiously elusive expression that had baffled the world for so many generations. Some had dismissed it as no more than a whim of the artist's but to others it seem that Yarlan Zey was smiling at some secret jest. Now Alvin knew that they had been correct.

Rorden was standing motionless before the statue, as if seeing it for the first time in his life. Presently he walked back a few yards and began to examine the great flagstones.

"What are you doing?" asked Alvin.

"Employing a little logic and a great deal of intuition," replied Rorden. He refused to say any more, and Alvin resumed his examination of the statue. He was still doing this when a faint sound behind him attracted his attention. Rorden, his face wreathed in smiles, was slowly sinking into the earth. He began to laugh at the boy's expression.

"I think I know how to reverse this," he said as he disappeared. "If I don't come up immediately, you'll have to pull me out with a gravity polarizer. But I don't think it will be necessary."

The last words were muffled and, rushing to the edge of the rectangular pit, Alvin saw that his friend was already many feet below the surface. Even as he watched, the shaft deepened swiftly until Rorden had dwindled to a speck no longer recognizable as a human being. Then, to Alvin's relief, the far-off rectangle of light began to expand and the pit shortened until Rorden was standing beside him once more.

For a moment there was a profound silence. Then Rorden smiled and began to speak.

"Logic," he said, "can do wonders if it has something to work upon. This building

is so simple that it couldn't conceal anything, and the only possible secret exit must be through the floor. I argued that it would be marked in some way, so I searched until I found a slab that differed from all the rest."

Alvin bent down and examined the floor.

"But it's just the same as all the others!" he protested.

Rorden put his hands on the boy's shoulders and turned him round until he was looking towards the statue. For a moment Alvin stared at it intently. Then he slowly nodded his head.

"I see," he whispered. "So *that* is the secret of Yarlan Zey!"

The eyes of the statue were fixed upon the floor at his feet. There was no mistake: Alvin moved to the next slab, and found that Yarlan Zey was no longer looking towards him.

"Not one person in a thousand would ever notice that unless he was looking for it," said Rorden, "and even then it would mean nothing to him. At first I felt rather foolish myself, standing on that slab and going through different combinations of control thoughts.

"Luckily the circuits must be fairly tolerant, and the code-thought turned out to be 'Alaine of Lyndar.' I tried 'Yarlan Zey' at first, but it wouldn't work, as I might have guessed. Too many people would have operated the machine by accident if that trigger thought had been used."

"It sounds very simple," admitted Alvin, "but I don't think I would have found it in a thousand years. Is that how the Associators work?"

Rorden laughed.

"Perhaps," he said. "I sometimes reach the answer before they do, but they *always* reach it." He paused for a moment. "We'll have to leave the shaft open. No one is likely to fall down it."

As they sank smoothly into the earth, the rectangle of sky dwindled until it seemed very small and far away. The shaft was lit by a phosphorescence that was part of the walls and seemed to be at least a thousand feet deep. The walls were perfectly smooth and gave no indication of the machinery that had lowered them.

The doorway at the bottom of the shaft opened automatically as they stepped towards it. A few paces took them through the short corridor—and then they were standing, overawed by its immensity, in a great circular cavern whose walls came together in a graceful sweeping curve three hundred feet above their heads.

The column against which they were standing seemed too slender to support the hundreds of feet of rock above it. Then Alvin noticed that it did not seem an integral part of the chamber at all, but was clearly of much later construction. Rorden had come to the same conclusion.

"This column," he said, "was built simply to house the shaft down which we came. We were right about the moving ways—they all lead into this place."

ALVIN had noticed, without realising what they were, the great tunnels that pierced the circumference of the chamber. He could see that they sloped gently upwards and now he recognised the familiar grey surface of the moving ways.

Here, far beneath the heart of the city, converged the wonderful transport system that carried all the traffic of Diaspar. But these were only the severed stumps of the great roadways. The strange material that gave them life was now frozen into immobility.

Alvin began to walk towards the nearest of the tunnels. He had gone only a few paces when he realised that something was happening to the ground beneath his feet. *It was becoming transparent.* A few more yards, and he seemed to be standing in mid-air without any visible support. He stopped and stared down into the void beneath.

"Rorden!" he called. "Come and look at this!"

The other joined him and together they gazed at the marvel beneath their feet. Faintly visible, at an indefinite depth, lay an enormous map—a great network of lines converging towards a spot beneath the central shaft. At first it seemed a confused maze, but after a while Alvin was able to grasp its main outlines. As usual, he had scarcely begun his own analysis before Rorden had finished his.

"The whole of this floor must have been transparent once," said the Keeper of the Records. "When this chamber was sealed and the shaft built, the engineers must have done something to make the center opaque. Do you understand what it is, Alvin?"

"I think so," replied the boy. "It's a map of the transport system, and those little circles must be the other cities of Earth. I can just see names beside them, but they're

too faint to read."

"There must have been some form of internal illumination once," said Rorden absently. He was looking towards the walls of the chamber.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed. "Do you see how all these radiating lines lead towards the small tunnels?"

Alvin had noticed that, besides the great arches of the moving ways, there were innumerable smaller tunnels leading out of the chamber—tunnels that sloped downwards instead of up.

Rorden continued without waiting for a reply. "It was a magnificent system. People would come down the moving ways, select the place they wished to visit and then follow the appropriate line on the map."

"And what happened then?" said Alvin.

As usual, Rorden refused to speculate.

"I haven't enough information," he answered. "I wish we could read the names of those cities!" he complained, changing the the subject abruptly

Alvan had wandered away and was circumnavigating the central pillar. Presently his voice came to Rorden, slightly muffled and overlaid with echoes from the walls of the chamber.

"What is it?" called Rorden, not wishing to move as he had nearly deciphered one of the dimly visible groups of characters. But Alvin's voice was insistent, so he went to join him.

Far beneath was the other half of the great map, its faint web-work radiating towards the points of the compass. But this time not all of it was too dim to be clearly seen, for one of the lines, and one only, was brilliantly illuminated.

It seemed to have no connection with the rest of the system and pointed like a gleaming arrow to one of the downward-sloping tunnels. Near its end the line transfixed a circle of golden light, and against that circle was the single word "LYS." That was all.

For a long time Alvin and Rorden stood gazing down at that silent symbol. To Rorden it was no more than another question for his machines, but to Alvin its promise was boundless. He tried to imagine this great chamber as it had been in the ancient days, when air transport had come to an end but the cities of Earth still had commerce one with the other.

He thought of the countless millions of years that had passed with the traffic steadily dwindling and the lights on the great map dying one by one, until at last only this single line remained. He wondered how long it had gleamed there among its darkened companions, waitng to guide the steps that never came, until at last Yarlan Zey had sealed the moving ways and closed Diaspar against the world.

That had been hundred of millions of years ago. Even then, Lys must have lost touch with Diaspar. It seemed impossible that it could have survived. Perhaps, after all, the map meant nothing now.

Rorden broke into his reverie at last. He seemed a little nervous and ill at ease.

"It's time we went back," he said. "I don't think we should go any farther now."

Alvin recognised the undertones in his friend's voice and did not argue with him. He was eager to go forward, but realised that it might not be wise without further preparation. Reluctantly he turned again towards the central pilllar. As he walked to the opening of the shaft the floor beneath him gradually clouded into opacity and the gleaming enigma far below faded from sight.

[*Turn page*]

CHAPTER IV

The Way Beneath

NOW that the way lay open at last before him, Alvin felt a strange reluctance to leave the familiar world of Diaspar. He began to discover that he himself was not immune from the fears he had so often derided in others.

Once or twice Rorden had tried to dissuade him, but the attempt had been half-hearted. It would have seemed strange to a man of the Dawn Ages that neither Alvin nor Rorden saw any danger in what they were doing.

For millions of years the world had held nothing that could threaten man, and even Alvin could not imagine types of human being greatly different from those he knew in Diaspar. That he might be detained against his will was a thought wholly inconceivable to him. At the worst he could only fail to discover anything.

Three days later they stood once more in the deserted chamber of the moving ways. Beneath their feet the arrow of light still pointed to Lys and now they were ready to follow it.

As they stepped into the tunnel they felt the familiar tug of the peristaltic field and in a moment were being swept effortlessly into the depths. The journey lasted scarcely half a minute. When it ended they were standing at one end of a long narrow chamber in the form of a half-cylinder. At the far end two dimly lit tunnels stretched away towards infinity.

Men of almost every civilization that had existed since the Dawn would have found their surroundings completely familiar. Yet to Alvin and Rorden they were a glimpse of another world. The purpose of the long streamlined machine that lay aimed like a projectile at the far tunnel was obvious, but that made it none the less novel.

Its upper portion was transparent and looking through the walls Alvin could see rows of luxuriously appointed seats. There was no sign of any entrance and the whole machine was floating about a foot above a single metal rod that stretched away into the distance, disappearing in one of the tunnels.

A few yards away another rod led to the second tunnel, but no machine floated above it. Alvin knew, as surely as if he had been told, that somewhere beneath unknown, far-off Lys, that second machine was waiting in another such chamber as this.

"Well," said Rorden, rather lamely, "are you ready?"

Alvin nodded.

"I wish you'd come," he said—and at once regretted it when he saw the disquiet on the other's face. Rorden was the closest friend he had ever possessed, but he could never break through the barriers that surrounded all his race.

"I'll be back within six hours," Alvin promised, speaking with difficulty, for there was a mysterious tightness in his throat. "Don't bother to wait for me. If I get back early I'll call you—there must be some communicators around here."

It was all very casual and matter-of-fact, Alvin told himself. Yet he could not help jumping when the walls of the machine faded and the beautifully designed interior lay open before his eyes.

Rorden was speaking, rather quickly and jerkily. "You'll have no difficulty in controlling the machine," he said. "Did you see how it obeyed that thought of mine? I should get inside quickly in case the time delay is fixed."

Alvin stepped aboard, placing his belongings on the nearest seat. He turned to face Rorden, who was standing in the barely visible frame of the doorway. For a moment there was a strained silence while each waited for the other to speak.

The decision was made for them. There was a faint flicker of translucence and the walls of the machine had closed again. Even as Rorden began to wave farewell the long cylinder started to ease itself forward. Before it had entered the tunnel it was already moving faster than a man could run.

Slowly Rorden made his way back to the chamber of the moving ways with its great central pillar. Sunlight was streaming down the open shaft as he rose to the surface. When he emerged again into the Tomb of Yarlan Zey he was disconcerted, though not surprised, to find a group of curious onlookers gathered around him.

"There's no need to be alarmed," he said gravely. "Someone has to do this every few thousand years, though it hardly seems necessary. The foundations of the city are per-

fectly stable—they haven't shifted a micro-inch since the Park was built."

He walked briskly away and, as he left the tomb, a quick backward glance showed him that the spectators were already dispersing. Rorden knew his fellow citizens well enough to be sure that they would think no more about the incident.

ALVIN settled back among the upholstery and let his eyes wander round the interior of the machine. For the first time he noticed the indicator board that formed part of the forward wall. It carried the simple message:

LYS
35 MINUTES

Even as he watched the number changed to 34. That at least was useful information, though as he had no idea of the machine's speed it told him nothing about the length of the journey. The walls of the tunnel were one continual blur of grey and the only sensation of movement was a very slight vibration he would never have noticed had he not been expecting it.

Diaspar must be many miles away by now and above him would be the desert with its shifting sand dunes. Perhaps at this very moment he was racing beneath the broken hills he had watched as a child from the Tower of Loranne.

His thoughts came back to Lys as they had done continually for the past few days. He wondered if it still existed and once again assured himself that not otherwise would the machine be carrying him there. What sort of city would it be? Somehow the strongest effort of his imagination could only picture another and smaller version of Diaspar.

Suddenly there was a distinct change in the vibration of the machine. It was slowing down—there was no question of that. The time must have passed more quickly than he had thought. Somewhat surprised, Alvin glanced at the indicator.

LYS
23 MINUTES

Feeling very puzzled and a little worried, he pressed his face against the side of the machine. His speed was still blurring the walls of the tunnel into a featureless grey, yet now from time to time he could catch a glimpse of markings that disappeared almost as quickly as they came. And at each appearance, they seemed to remain in his field of vision for a little longer.

Then, without any warning, the walls of the tunnel were snatched away on either side. The machine was passing, still at a very great speed, through an enormous empty space, far larger even than the chamber of the moving ways.

Peering in wonder through the transparent walls, Alvin could glimpse beneath him an intricate network of guiding rods, rods that crossed and crisscrossed to disappear into a maze of tunnels on either side. Overhead a long row of artificial suns flooded the chamber with light and, silhouetted against the glare, he could just make out the frameworks of great carrying machines.

The light was so brilliant that it pained the eyes, and Alvin knew that this place had not been intended for man. What it was intended for became clear a moment later, when his vehicle flashed past row after row of cylinders, lying motionless above their guide-rails. They were much larger than the machine in which he was traveling, and Alvin realised that they must be freight transporters. Around them were grouped incomprehensible machines, all silent and stilled.

Almost as quickly as it had appeared the vast and lonely chamber vanished behind him. Its passing left a feeling of awe in Alvin's mind. For the first time he really understood the meaning of that great darkened map below Diaspar. The world was more full of wonder than he had ever dreamed.

Alvin glanced again at the indicator. It had not changed: he had taken less than a minute to flash through the great cavern. The machine was accelerating again, although there was still no sense of motion. But on either side the tunnel walls were flowing past at a speed he could not even guess.

It seemed an age before that indefinable change of vibration occurred again. Now the indicator was reading:

LYS
1 MINUTE

and that minute was the longest Alvin had ever known. More and more slowly moved

the machine. This was no mere slackening of its speed. It was coming to rest at last.

Smoothly and silently the long cylinder slid out of the tunnel into a cavern that might have been the twin of the one beneath Diaspar. For a moment Alvin was too excited to see anything clearly. His thoughts were jumbled and he could not even control the door, which opened and closed several times before he pulled himself together.

As he jumped out of the machine he caught a last glimpse of the indicator. Its wording had changed and there was something about its message that was very reassuring:

DIASPAR
35 MINUTES

CHAPTER V

The Land of Lys

IT HAD been as simple as that. No one could have guessed that he had made a journey that might be as fateful as any in the history of Man.

As he began to search for a way out of the chamber, Alvin found the first sign that he was in a civilization very different from the one he had left. The way to the surface clearly lay through a low wide tunnel at one end of the cavern—and leading up through the tunnel was a flight of steps.

Such a thing was almost unknown in Diaspar. The machines disliked stairways and the architects of the city had built ramps or sloping corridors wherever there was a change of level. Was it possible that there were no machines in Lys? The idea was so fantastic that Alvin dismissed it at once.

The stairway was very short and ended against doors that opened at his approach. As they closed silently behind him, Alvin found himself in a large cubical room which appeared to have no other exit. He stood for a moment, a little puzzled, and then began to examine the opposite wall. As he did so the doors through which he had entered opened once more.

Feeling somewhat annoyed, Alvin left the room again—to find himself looking along a vaulted corridor rising slowly to an archway that framed a semicircle of sky. He realized that he must have risen many hundreds of feet, but there had been no sensation of movement. Then he hurried forward up the slope to the sunlit opening.

He was standing at the brow of a low hill, and for an instant it seemed as if he were once again in the central park of Diaspar. Yet if this were indeed a park, it was too enormous for his mind to grasp. The city he had expected to see was nowhere visible. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but forest and grass-covered plains.

Then Alvin lifted his eyes to the horizon and there above the trees, sweeping from right to left in a great arc that encircled the world, was a line of stone which would have dwarfed the mightiest giants of Diaspar.

It was so far away that its details were blurred by sheer distance, but there was something about its outlines that Alvin found puzzling. Then his eyes became at last accustomed to the scale of that colossal landscape and he knew that those far-off walls had not been built by man.

Time had not conquered everything. Earth still possessed mountains of which she could be proud.

For a long time Alvin stood at the mouth of the tunnel, growing accustomed to the strange world in which he had found himself. Search as he might, nowhere could he see any trace of human life. Yet the road that led down the hillside seemed well-kept. He could do no more than accept its guidance.

At the foot of the hill the road disappeared between great trees that almost hid the sun. As Alvin walked into their shadow a strange medley of scents and sounds greeted him. The rustle of the wind among the leaves he had known before, but underlying that were a thousand vague noises that conveyed nothing to his mind.

Unknown odors assailed him, smells that had been lost even to the memory of his race. The warmth, the profusion of scent and color, the unseen presences of a million living things, smote him with almost physical violence.

He came upon the lake without any warning. The trees to the right suddenly ended and before him was a great expanse of water, dotted with tiny islands. Never in his life had Alvin seen such quantities of the precious liquid. He walked to the edge of the lake and let the warm water trickle through

his fingers.

The great silver fish that suddenly forced its way through the underwater reeds was the first non-human creature he had ever seen. As it hung in nothingness, its fins a faint blur of motion, Alvin wondered why its shape was so startlingly familiar.

Then he remembered the records that Jeserac had shown him as a child and knew where he had seen those graceful lines before. Logic told him that the resemblance could only be accidental—but logic was wrong.

All through the ages artists had been inspired by the urgent beauty of the great ships driving from world to world. Once there had been craftsmen who had worked, not with crumbling metal or decaying stone, but with the most imperishable of all materials—flesh and blood and bone. Though they and all their race had been utterly forgotten, one of their dreams had survived the ruin of cities and the wreck of continents.

AT LAST Alvin broke the lake's enchantment and continued along the winding road. The forest closed around him once more, but only for a little while. Presently the road ended in a great clearing, perhaps half a mile wide and twice as long. Now Alvin understood why he had seen no trace of man before.

The clearing was full of low two-storied buildings, colored in soft shades that rested the eye even in the full glare of the sun. They were of clean, straightforward design, but several were built in a complex architectural style involving the use of fluted columns and gracefully fretted stone. In these buildings, which seemed of great age, the immeasurably ancient device of the pointed arch was used.

As he walked slowly towards the village Alvin was still struggling to grasp his new surroundings. Nothing was familiar. Even the air had changed. And the tall, golden-haired people coming and going among the buildings were very different from the languid citizens of Diaspar.

Alvin had almost reached the village when he saw a group of men coming purposefully towards him. He felt a sudden, heady excitement and the blood pounded in his veins. For an instant there flashed through his mind the memory of all Man's fateful meetings with other races. Then he came to a halt, a few feet away from the others.

They seemed surprised to see him, yet not as surprised as he had expected. Very quickly he understood why. The leader of the party extended his hand in the ancient gesture of friendship.

"We thought it best to meet you here," he said. "Our home is very different from Diaspar and the walk from the terminus gives visitors a chance to become—acclimatized."

Alvin accepted the outstretched hand, but for a moment was too astonished to reply.

"You knew I was coming?" he gasped at length.

"We always know when the carriers start to move. But we did not expect anyone so young. How did you discover the way?"

"I think we'd better restrain our curiosity, Gerane. Seranis is waiting."

The name "Seranis" was preceded by a word unfamiliar to Alvin. It somehow conveyed an impression of affection, tempered with respect.

Gerane agreed with the speaker and the party began to move into the village. As they walked Alvin studied the faces around him. They appeared kindly and intelligent. There were none of the signs of boredom, mental strife and faded brilliance he might have found in a similar group in his own city.

To his broadening mind it seemed that they possessed all that his own people had lost. When they smiled, which was often, they revealed lines of ivory teeth—the pearls that Man had lost and won and lost again in the long story of evolution.

The people of the village watched with frank curiosity as Alvin followed his guides. He was amazed to see not a few children, who stared at him in grave surprise. No other single face brought home to him so vividly his remoteness from the world he knew. Diaspar had paid, and paid in full, the price of immortality.

The party halted before the largest building Alvin had yet seen. It stood in the center of the village and from a flagpole on its small circular tower a green pennant floated along the breeze.

All but Gerane dropped behind as he entered the building. Inside it was quiet and cool. Sunlight filtering through the translucent walls lit up everything with a soft restful glow. The floor was smooth and resilient, inlaid with fine mosaics.

On the walls an artist of great ability and power had depicted a set of forest scenes. Mingled with these paintings were other

murals which conveyed nothing to Alvin's mind, yet more attractive and pleasant to look upon. Let into the wall was something he had hardly expected to see—a visiphone receiver, beautifully made, its idle screen filled with a maze of shifting colors.

They walked together up a short circular stairway that led them out on the flat roof of the building. From this point the entire village was visible and Alvin could see that it consisted of about a hundred buildings. In the distance the trees opened out into wide meadows. He could see animals in some of the fields, but his knowledge of zoology was too slight for him to guess at their nature.

In the shadow of the tower two people were sittting together at a desk, watching him intently. As they rose to greet him Alvin saw that one was a stately, very handsome woman, whose golden hair was shot through with wisps of grey. This, he knew, must be Seranis. Looking into her eyes he could sense that wisdom and depth of experience he felt when he was with Rorden and, more rarely, with Jeserac.

The other was a boy, a little older than himself in appearance, and Alvin needed no second glance to tell that Seranis must be his mother. The clear-cut features were the same, though the eyes held only friendliness and not that almost frightening wisdom. The hair, too, was different—black instead of gold—but on one could have mistaken the relationship between them.

Feeling a little overawed Alvin turned to his guide for support—but Gérane had already vanished. Then Seranis smiled and his nervousness left him.

"Welcome to Lys," she said. "I am Seranis and this is my son Theon, who will one day take my place. You are the youngest who has ever come to us from Diaspar. Tell me how you found the way."

HALTINGLY at first, then with increasing confidence, Alvin began his story. Theon followed his words eagerly, for Diaspar must have been as strange to him as Lys had been to Alvin. But Seranis, Alvin could see, knew all that he was telling her and once or twice she asked questions which showed that, in some things at least, her knowledge went beyond his own. When he had finished there was silence for a while.

Then Seranis looked at him and said quietly, "Why did you come to Lys?"

"I wanted to explore the world," he replied. "Everyone told me that there was only desert beyond the city, but I wanted to make sure for myself."

The eyes of Seranis were full of sympathy and even sadness when she spoke again. "And was that the only reason?"

Alvin hesitated. When he answered it was not the explorer who spoke, but the boy not long removed from childhood.

"No," he said slowly, "it wasn't the only reason, though I did not know until now. I was lonely."

"Lonely? In Diaspar?"

"Yes," said Alvin. "I am the only child to be born there for seven thousand years."

Those wonderful eyes were still upon him, and looking into their depths Alvin had the sudden conviction that Seranis could read his mind. Even as the thought came he saw an expression of amused surprise pass across her face—and he knew that his guess had been correct. Once both men and machines had possessed this power, and the unchanging machines could still read their master's orders. But in Diaspar Man himself had lost the gift he had given to his slaves.

Rather quickly Seranis broke into his thoughts.

"If you are looking for life," she said, "your search has ended. Apart from Diaspar, there is only desert beyond our mountains."

It was strange that Alvin, who had questioned accepted beliefs so often before, did not doubt the words of Seranis. His only reaction was one of sadness that all his teaching had been so nearly true.

"Tell me something about Lys," he asked. "Why have you been cut off from Diaspar for so long when you know all about us?"

Seranis smiled at his question.

"It's not easy to answer that in a few words, but I'll do my best.

"Because you have lived in Diaspar all your life, you have come to think of Man as a city dweller. That isn't true, Alvin. Since the machines gave us freedom there has always been a rivalry between two different types of civilization. In the Dawn Ages there were thousands of cities, but a large part of mankind lived in communities like this village of ours.

"We have no records of the founding of Lys, but we know that our remote ancestors disliked city life intensely and would have nothing to do with it. In spite of swift and

universal transport they kept themselves largely apart from the rest of the world and developed an independent culture which was one of the highest the race had ever known.

"Through the ages, as we advanced along our different roads, the gulf between Lys and the cities widened. It was bridged only in times of great crisis. We know that when the Moon was falling its destruction was planned and carried out by the scientists of Lys. So too was the defense of Earth against the Invaders, whom we held at the Battle of Shalmirane.

"That great ordeal exhausted mankind. One by one the cities died and the desert rolled over them. As the population fell humanity began the migration which was to make Diaspar the last and greatest of all cities.

"Most of these changes passed us by, but we had our own battle to fight—the battle against the desert. The natural barrier of the mountains was not enough and many thousand of years passed before we had made our land secure. Far beneath Lys are machines which will give us water as long as the world remains, for the old oceans are still there, miles down in the Earth's crust.

"That, very briefly, is our history. You will see that even in the Dawn Ages we had little to do with the cities, though their people often came into our land. We never hindered them, for many of our greatest men came from Outside, but when the cities were dying we did not wish to be involved in their downfall.

"With the ending of air transport there was only one way into Lys—the carrier system from Diaspar. Four hundred million years ago that was closed by mutual agreement. But we have remembered Diaspar and I do not know why you have forgotten Lys."

Seranis smiled, a little wryly.

"Diaspar has surprised us. We expected it to go the way of all other cities, but instead it has achieved a stable culture that may last as long as Earth. It is not a culture we admire, yet we are glad that those who wished to escape have been able to do so. More than you think have made the journey and they have almost all been outstanding men."

Alvin wondered how Seranis could be so sure of her facts, and he did not approve of her attitude towards Diaspar. He had hardly "escaped"—yet, after all, the word was not altogether inaccurate.

Somewhere a great bell vibrated with a throbbing boom that ebbed and died in the still air. Six times it struck and as the last note faded into silence Alvin realized that the sun was low on the horizon and the eastern sky already held a hint of night.

"I must return to Diaspar," he said. "Rorden is expecting me."

CHAPTER VI

The Last Niagara

SERANIS looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. Then she rose to her feet and walked towards the stairway.

"Please wait a little while," she said. "I have some business to settle and Theon, I know, has many questions to ask you."

Then she was gone and for the next few minutes Theon's barrage of questions drove any other thoughts from his mind. Theon had heard of Diaspar and had seen records of the cities as they were at the height of their glory, but he could not imagine how their inhabitants had passed their lives. Alvin was amused at many of his questions—until he realised that his own ignorance of Lys was even greater.

Seranis was gone for many minutes, but her expression revealed nothing when she returned.

"We have been talking about you," she said—not explaining who "we" might be. "If you return to Diaspar the whole city will know about us. Whatever promises you make the secret could not be kept."

A feeling of slight panic began to creep over Alvin. Seranis must have known his thoughts, for her next words were more reassuring.

"We don't wish to keep you here against your wishes. But if you return to Diaspar we will have to erase all memories of Lys from your mind." She hesitated for a moment. "This has never arisen before. All your predecessors came her to stay."

Alvin was thinking deeply.

"Why should it matter," he said, "if Diaspar does learn about you again? Surely it would be a good thing for both our peoples?"

Seranis looked displeased.

"We don't think so," she said. "If the gates were opened our land would be flooded with sensation seekers and the idly curious. As things are now, only the best of your people have ever reached us."

Alvin felt himself becoming steadily more annoyed, but he realized that Seranis' attitude was quite unconscious.

"That isn't true," he said flatly. "Very few of us would ever leave Diaspar. If you let me return it would make no difference to Lys."

"The decision is not in my hands," replied Seranis, "but I will put it to the Council when it meets three days from now. Until then you can remain as my guest and Theon will show your our country."

"I would like to do that," said Alvin, "but Rorden will be waiting for me. He knows where I am and if I don't come back at once anything may happen."

Seranis smiled slightly.

"We have given that a good deal of thought," she admitted. "There are men working on the problem now—we will see if they have been successful."

Alvin was annoyed at having overlooked something so obvious. He knew that the engineers of the past had built for eternity—his journey to Lys had been proof of that. Yet it gave him a shock when the chromatic mist on the visiphone screen drifted aside to show the familiar outlines of Rorden's room.

The Keeper of the Records looked up from his desk. His eyes lit when he saw Alvin.

"I never expected you to be early," he said, though there was relief behind the jesting words. "Shall I come to meet you?"

While Alvin hesitated, Seranis stepped forward and Rorden saw her for the first time. His eyes widened and he leaned forward as if to obtain a better view. The movement was as useless as it was automatic—Man had not lost it even though he had used the visiphone for a thousand million years.

Seranis laid her hands on Alvin's shoulders and began to speak. When she had finished Rorden was silent for a while.

"I'll do my best," he said at length. "As I understand it the choice lies between sending Alvin back to us under some form of hypnosis—or returning him with no restrictions at all. But I think I can promise that, even if it learns of your existence, Diaspar will continue to ignore you."

"We won't overlook that possibility," Seranis replied with just a trace of pique. Rorden detected it instantly.

"And what of myself?" he asked with a smile. "I know as much as Alvin now."

"Alvin is a boy," replied Seranis quickly "but you hold an office as ancient as Diaspar. This is not the first time Lys has spoken to the Keeper of the Records and he has never betrayed our secret yet."

Rorden made no comment. He merely said, "How long do you wish to keep Alvin?"

"At the most five days. The Council meets three days from now."

"Very well. For the next five days then, Alvin is extremely busy on some historical research with me. This won't be the first time it's happened—but we'll have to be out if Jeserac calls."

Alvin laughed.

"Poor Jeserac! I seem to spend half my life hiding things from him."

"You've been much less successful than you think," replied Rorden somewhat disconcertingly. "However, I don't expect any trouble. But don't be longer than the five days!"

WHEN the picture had faded Rorden sat for awhile, staring at the darkened screen. He had always suspected that the world communication network might still be in existence, but the keys to its operation had been lost and the billions of circuits could never be traced by man.

It was strange to reflect that even now visiphones might be calling vainly in the lost cities. Perhaps the time would come when his own receiver would do the same and there would be no Keeper of the Records to answer the unknown caller.

He began to feel afraid. The immensity of what had happened was slowly dawning upon him. Until now Rorden had given little thought to the consequences of his actions His own historical interests and his affection for Alvin had been sufficient motive for what he had done. Though he had humored and encouraged Alvin, he had never believed that anything like this could possibly happen.

Despite the centuries between them the boy's will had always been more powerful than his own. It was too late to do anything about it now. Rorden felt that events were sweeping him along towards a climax utterly beyond his control.

"Is all this really necessary," said Alvin,

"if we are only going to be away for two or three days? After all, we have a synthesizer with us."

"Probably not," answered Theon, throwing the last food containers into the little ground-car. "It may seem an odd custom, but we've never synthesized some of our finest foods—we like to watch them grow.

"Also, we may meet other parties and it's polite to exchange food with them. Nearly every district has some special product and Airlee is famous for its peaches. That's why I've put so many aboard—not because I think that even you can eat them all."

Alvin threw his half-eaten peach at Theon, who dodged quickly aside.

There came a flicker of iridescence and a faint whirring of invisible wings as Krif descended upon the fruit and began to sip its juices.

Alvin was still not quite used to Krif. It was hard for him to realise that the great insect, though it would come when called and would—sometimes—obey simple orders, was almost wholly mindless.

Life, to Alvin, had always been synonymous with intelligence—sometimes intelligence far higher than Man's.

When Krif was resting his six gauzy wings lay folded along his body, which glittered through them like a jewelled sceptre. He was at once the highest and the most beautiful form of insect life the world had ever known—the latest and perhaps the last of all the creatures Man had chosen for his companionship.

Lys was full of such surprises, as Alvin was continually learning. Its inconspicuous but efficient transport system had been equally unexpected. The ground-car apparently worked on the same principle as the machine that had brought him from Diaspar, for it floated in the air a few inches above the turf.

Although there was no sign of any guide-rail, Theon told him that the cars could only run on predetermined tracks.

All the centers of population were thus linked together, but the remoter parts of the country could only be reached on foot. This state of affairs seemed altogether extraordinary to Alvin, but Theon seemed to think it was an excellent idea.

Apparently Theon had been planning this expedition for a considerable time. Natural history was his chief passion—Krif was only the most spectacular of his many pets—and he hoped to find new types of insect life in the uninhabited southern parts of Lys.

The project had filled Alvin with enthusiasm when he heard of it. He looked forward to seeing more of this wonderful country and, although Theon's interests lay in a different field of knowledge from his own, he felt a kinship for his new companion which not even Rorden had ever awakened.

Theon intended to travel south as far as the machine could go—little more than an hour's journey from Airlee—and the rest of the way they would have to go on foot. Not realizing the full implications of this, Alvin had no objections.

To Alvin, the journey across Lys had a dreamlike unreality. Silent as a ghost the machine slid across rolling plains and wound its way through forests, never deviating from its invisible track. It traveled perhaps a dozen times as fast as a man could comfortably walk. No one in Lys was ever in a greater hurry than that.

MANY times they passed through villages, some larger than Airlee, but most built along very similar lines. Alvin was interested to notice subtle but significant differences in clothing and even physical appearance as they moved from one community to the next. The civilization of Lys was composed of hundreds of distinct cultures, each contributing some special talent towards the whole.

Once or twice Theon stopped to speak to friends, but the pauses were brief and it was still morning when the little machine came to rest among the foothills of a heavily wooded mountain.

It was not a very large mountain, but Alvin thought it the most tremendous thing he had ever seen.

"This is where we start to walk," said Theon cheerfully, throwing equipment out of the car. "We can't ride any further."

As he fumbled with the straps that were to convert him into a beast of burden, Alvin looked doubtfully at the great mass of rock before them.

"It's a long way 'round, isn't it?" he queried.

"We aren't going 'round," replied Theon. "I want to get to the top before nightfall."

Alvin said nothing. He had been rather afraid of this.

"From here," said Theon, raising his voice to make it heard above the thunder

of the waterfall, "you can see the whole of Lys."

Alvin could well believe him. To the north lay mile upon mile of forest, broken here and there by clearings and fields and the wandering threads of a hundred rivers. Hidden somewhere in that vast panorama was the village of Airlee.

Alvin fancied that he could catch a glimpse of the great lake, but decided that his eyes had tricked him.

Still further north trees and clearings alike were lost in a mottled carpet of green, rucked here and there by lines of hills. And beyond that, at the very edge of vision, the mountains that hemmed Lys from the desert lay like a bank of distant clouds.

EAST and west the view was a little different, but to the south the mountains seemed only a few miles away. Alvin could see them very clearly and he realized that they were far higher than the little peak on which he was standing.

But more wonderful even than these was the waterfall. From the sheer face of the mountain a mighty ribbon of water leaped far out over the valley, curving down through space towards the rocks a thousand feet below.

There it was lost in a shimmering mist of spray, while up from the depths rose a ceaseless, drumming thunder that reverberated in hollow echoes from the mountain walls. And quivering in the air above the base of the fall was the last rainbow which was left on Earth.

For long minutes the two boys lay on the edge of the cliff, gazing at this last Niagara and the unknown land beyond. It was very different from the country they had left, for in some indefinable way it seemed deserted and empty. Man had not lived here for many, many years.

Theon answered his friend's unspoken question.

"Once the whole of Lys was inhabited," he said, "but that was a very long time ago. Only the animals live here now."

Indeed, there was nowhere any sign of human life—none of the clearings or well-disciplined rivers that spoke of Man's presence. Only in one spot was there any indication that he had ever lived here, for many miles away a solitary white ruin jutted above the forest roof like a broken fang. Elsewhere the jungle had returned to its own.

CHAPTER VII

The Crater Dweller

IT WAS night when Alvin awoke, the utter night of mountain country, terrifying in its intensity. Something had disturbed him, some whisper of sound that had crept into his mind above the dull thunder of the falls.

He sat up in the darkness, straining his eyes across the hidden land, while with indrawn breath he listened to the drumming roar of the falls and the faint but unending rustle of life in the trees around him.

Nothing was visible. The starlight was too dim to reveal the miles of country that lay hundreds of feet below. Only a jagged line of darker night eclipsing the stars told of the mountains on the southern horizon. In the darkness beside him Alvin heard his friend roll over and sit up.

"What is it?" came a whispered voice.

"I thought I heard a noise."

"What sort of noise?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I was only dreaming."

There was silence while two pairs of eyes peered out into the mystery of night. Then, suddenly, Theon caught his friend's arm.

"Look!" he whispered.

Far to the south glowed a solitary point of light, too low in the heavens to be a star. It was a brilliant white, tinged with violet and, as the boys watched, it began to climb the spectrum of intensity, until the eye could no longer bear to look upon it.

Then it exploded—and it seemed as if lightning had struck below the rim of the world. For an instant the mountains and the great land they guarded were etched with fire against the darkness of the night. Ages later came the echo of a mighty explosion and in the forest below a sudden wind stirred among the trees. It died away swiftly and one by one the routed stars crept back into the sky.

For the first time in his life Alvin knew that fear of the unknown that had been the curse of ancient man. It was a feeling so strange that for a while he could not even give it a name. In the moment of recognition it vanished and he became himself again.

"What is it?" he whispered.

There was a pause so long that he repeated the question.

"I'm trying to remember," said Theon and was silent for a while. A little later he spoke again.

"That must be Shalmirane," he said simply.

"Shalmirane! Does it still exist?"

"I'd almost forgotten," replied Theon, "but it's coming back now. Mother once told me that the fortress lies in those mountains. Of course, it's been in ruins for ages, but someone is still supposed to live there."

Shalmirane! To these children of two races, so widely differing in culture and history, this was indeed a name of magic. In all the long story of Earth there had been no greater epic than the defense of Shalmirane against an invader who had conquered all the Universe.

Presently Theon's voice came again out of the darkness.

"The people of the south could tell us more. We will ask them on our way back."

Alvin scarcely heard him. He was deep in his own thoughts, remembering stories that Rorden had told him long ago. The Battle of Shalmirane lay at the dawn of recorded history. It marked the end of the legendary ages of Man's conquests and the beginning of his long decline. In Shalmirane, if anywhere on Earth, lay the answers to the problems that had tormented him for so many years. But the southern mountains were very far away.

Theon must have shared something of his mother's powers, for he said quietly, "If we started at dawn we could reach the fortress by nightfall. I've never been there, but I think I could find the way."

Alvin thought it over. He was tired, his feet were sore and the muscles of his thighs were aching with the unaccustomed effort. It was very tempting to leave it until another time. Yet there might be no other time and there was even the possibility that the actinic explosion had been a signal for help.

BENEATH the dim light of the failing stars Alvin wrestled with his thoughts and presently made his decision. Nothing had changed. The mountains resumed their watch over the sleeping land. But a turning-point in history had come and gone and the human race was moving towards a strange new future.

The sun had just lifted above the eastern wall of Lys when they reached the outskirts of the forest. Here nature had returned to her own. Even Theon seemed lost among the gigantic trees that blocked the sunlight and cast pools of shadow on the jungle floor.

Fortunately the river from the fall flowed south in a line too straight to be altogether natural and, by keeping to its edge, they could avoid the denser undergrowth. A good deal of Theon's time was spent in controlling Krif, who disappeared occasionally into the jungle or went skimming wildly across the water.

Even Alvin, to whom everything was still so new, could feel that the forest had a fascination not possessed by the smaller, more cultivated woods of northern Lys. Few trees were alike—most of them were in various stages of devolution and some had reverted through the ages almost to their original, natural forms.

Many were obviously not of Earth at all —perhaps not even of the Solar System. Watching like sentinels over the lesser trees were giant sequoias, three or four hundred feet high. They had once been called the oldest things on Earth. They were still a little older than Man.

The river was widening now. Ever and and again it opened into small lakes upon which tiny islands lay at anchor. There were insects here, brilliantly colored creatures, swinging aimlessly to and fro over the surface of the water. Once, despite Theon's shouts, Krif darted away to join his distant cousins.

He disappeared instantly in a cloud of glittering wings and the sound of angry buzzing floated towards them. A moment later the cloud erupted and Krif came back across the water, almost too quickly for the eye to follow. Thereafter he kept very close to Theon and did not stray again.

Towards evening they caught occasional glimpses of the mountains ahead. The river that had been so faithful a guide was flowing sluggishly now, as if it too were nearing the end of its journey. But it was clear that they could not reach the mountains by nightfall.

Well before sunset the forest had become so dark that further progress was impossible. The great trees lay in pools of shadow and a cold wind was sweeping through the leaves. Alvin and Theon settled down for the night beside a giant redwood whose topmost branches were still ablaze with sunlight.

When at last the hidden sun went down the light still lingered on the dancing waters. The two boys lay in the gathering gloom, watching the river and thinking of all that they had seen. As Alvin fell asleep, he found himself wondering who last had come this way and how long since.

The sun was high when they left the forest and stood at last before the mountain walls of Lys. Ahead of them the ground rose steeply to the sky in waves of barren rock. Here the river came to an end as spectacular as its beginning, for the ground opened in its path and it sank roaring from sight.

For a moment Theon stood looking at the whirlpool and the broken land beyond. Then he pointed to a gap in the hills.

"Shalmirane lies in that direction," he said confidently. Alvin looked at him in surprise.

"You told me you'd never been here before!"

"I haven't."

"Then how do you know the way?"

Theon looked puzzled.

"I don't know—I've never thought about it before. It must be a kind of instinct, for wherever we go in Lys we always know our way about."

Alvin found this very difficult to believe, and followed Theon with considerable skepticism. They were soon through the gap in the hills and ahead of them now was a curious plateau with gently sloping sides.

After a moment's hesitation Theon started to climb. Alvin followed, full of doubts, and as he climbed he began to compose a little speech. If the journey proved in vain Theon would know exactly what he thought of his unerring instinct.

AS THEY approached the summit the nature of the ground altered abruptly. The lower slopes had consisted of porous volcanic stone, piled here and there in great mounds of slag. Now the surface turned suddenly to hard sheets of glass, smooth and treacherous, as if the rock had once run in molten rivers down the mountain. The rim of the plateau was almost at their feet.

Theon reached it first and, a few seconds later, Alvin overtook him and stood speechless at his side. For they stood on the edge, not of the plateau they had expected, but of a giant bowl half a mile deep and three miles in diameter. Ahead of them the ground plunged steeply downwards, slowly leveling out at the bottom of the valley and rising again, more and more steeply, to the opposite rim.

And although it now lay in the full glare of the sun, the whole of that great depression was ebon black. What material formed the crater the boys could not even guess, but it was black as the rock of a world that had never known a sun. Nor was that all, for lying beneath their feet and ringing the entire crater was a seamless band of metal, some hundred feet wide, tarnished by immeasurable age but still showing no slightest trace of corrosion.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the unearthly scene Alvin and Theon realized that the blackness of the bowl was not as absolute as they had thought. Here and there, so fugitive that they could only see them indirectly, tiny explosions of light were flickering in the ebon walls. They came at random, vanishing as soon as they were born, like the reflections of stars on a broken sea.

"It's wonderful!" gasped Alvin. "But what is it?"

"It looks like a reflector of some kind."

"I can't imagine that black stuff reflecting anything."

"It's only black to our eyes, remember. We don't know what radiations they used."

"But surely there's more than this! Where *is* the fortress."

Theon pointed to the level floor of the crater, where lay what Alvin had taken to be a pile of jumbled stones. As he looked again, he could make out an almost obliterated plan behind the grouping of the great blocks. Yes, there lay the ruins of once mighty buildings, overthrown by time.

For the first few hundred yards the walls were too smooth and steep for the boys to stand upright, but after a little while they reached the gentler slopes and could walk without difficulty. Near the bottom of the crater the smooth ebony of its surface ended in a thin layer of soil, which the winds of Lys must have brought here through the ages.

A quarter of a mile away titanic blocks of stone were piled one upon the other, like the discarded toys of an infant giant. Here a section of a massive wall was still recognizable—there two carven obelisks marked what had once been a mighty entrance. Everywhere grew mosses and creeping plants and tiny stunted trees. Even the wind was hushed.

So Alvin and Theon came to the ruins of Shalmirane. Against those walls, if legend spoke the truth, forces that could shatter a world to dust had flamed and thundered and been utterly defeated. Once these peaceful skies had blazed with fires torn from the hearts of suns, and the mountains of Lys must have quailed like living things beneath the fury of their masters.

No one had ever captured Shalmirane. But now the fortress, the impregnable fortress, had fallen at last—captured and destroyed by the patient tendrils of the ivy and the generations of blindly burrowing worms.

Overawed by its majesty the two boys walked in silence towards the colossal wreck. They passed into the shadow of a broken wall and entered a canyon where the mountains of stone had split asunder.

Before them lay a great amphitheater, crossed and criss-crossed with long mounds of rubble that must mark the graves of buried machines. Once the whole of this tremendous space had been vaulted, but the roof had long since collapsed.

Yet life must still exist somewhere among the desolation and Alvin realized that even this ruin might be no more than superficial. The greater part of the fortress would be far underground, beyond the reach of Time.

"We'll have to turn back by noon," said Theon, "so we mustn't stay too long. It would be quicker if we separated. I'll take the eastern half and you can explore this side. Shout if you find anything interesting —but don't get too far away."

SO THEY separated and Alvin began to climb over the rubble, skirting the larger mounds of stone. Near the center of the arena he came suddenly upon a small circular clearing, thirty or forty feet in diameter. It had been covered with weeds, but they were now blackened and charred by tremendous heat, so that they crumbled to ashes at his approach.

At the center of the clearing stood a tripod supporting a polished metal bowl, not unlike a model of Shalmirane itself. It was capable of movement in altitude and azimuth and a spiral of some transparent substance was supported at its center. Beneath the reflector was welded a black box from which a thin cable wandered away across the ground.

It was clear to Alvin that this machine must be the source of the light and he began to trace the cable. It was not too easy to follow the slender wire, which had a habit of diving into crevasses and reappearing at unexpected places. Finally he lost it altogether and shouted to Theon to come and help him.

He was crawling under an overhanging rock when a shadow suddenly blotted out the light. Thinking it was his friend, Alvin emerged from the cave and turned to speak. But the words died abruptly on his lips.

Hanging in the air before him was a great dark eye surrounded by a satellite system of smaller eyes. That, at least, was Alvin's first impression: then he realized that he was looking at a complex machine—and it was looking at him.

Alvin broke the painful silence. All his life he had given orders to machines and, although he had never seen anything quite like this creature, he decided that it was probably intelligent.

"Reverse," he ordered experimentally.

Nothing happened.

"Go. Come. Rise. Fall. Advance."

None of the conventional control thoughts produced an effect. The machine remained contemptuously inactive.

Alvin took a step forward, and the eyes retreated in some haste. Unfortunately, their angle of vision seemed somewhat limited, for the machine came to a sudden halt against Theon, who for the last minute had been an interested spectator. With a perfectly human ejaculation the whole apparatus shot twenty feet into the air, revealing a set of tentacles and jointed limbs clustering round a stubby cylindrical body.

"Come down—we won't hurt you!" called Theon, rubbing a bruise on his chest.

Something spoke—not the passionless, crystal-clear voice of a machine, but the quavering speech of a very old and very tired man.

"Who are you? What are you doing in Shalmirane?"

"My name is Theon, and this is my friend, Alvin of Loronei. We're exploring Southern Lys."

There was a brief pause. When the machine spoke again its voice held an unmistakable note of petulance and annoyance.

"Why can't you leave me in peace? You know how often I've asked to be left alone!"

Theon, usually good natured, bristled visibly.

"We're from Airlee and we don't know

anything about Shalmirane."

"Besides," Alvin added reproachfully, "we saw your light and though you might be signaling for help."

It was strange to hear so human a sigh from the coldly impersonal machine.

"A million times I must have signaled now and all I have ever done is to draw the inquisitive from Lys. But I see you mean no harm. Follow me."

The machine floated slowly away over the broken stones, coming to rest before a dark opening in the ruined wall of the amphitheater. In the shadow of the cave something moved and a human figure stepped into the sunlight. He was the first physically old man Alvin had ever seen. His head was completely bald, but a thick growth of pure white hair covered all the lower part of his face. A cloak of woven glass was thrown carelessly over his shoulders and on either side of him floated two more of the strange, many-eyed machines.

CHAPTER VIII

The Story of Shalmirane

THERE was a brief silence while each side regarded the other. Then the old man spoke—and the three machines echoed his voice for a moment until something switched them off.

"So you are from the North and your people have already forgotten Shalmirane."

"Oh no!" said Theon quickly, "we've not forgotten. But we weren't sure that anyone still lived here and we certainly didn't know that you wished to be left alone."

The old man did not reply. Moving with a slowness that was painful to watch, he hobbled through the doorway and disappeared, the three machines floating silently after him. Alvin and Theon looked at each other in surprise. They did not like to follow, but their dismissal—if dismissal it was—had certainly been brusque. They were starting to argue the matter when one of the machines suddenly reappeared.

"What are you waiting for? Come along!" it ordered. Then it vanished again.

Alvin shrugged his shoulders.

"We appear to be invited. I think our host's eccentric, but he seems friendly."

From the opening in the wall a wide spiral stairway led downwards for a score of feet. It ended in a small circular room from which several corridors radiated. However, there was no possibility of confusion, for all the passages save one were blocked with debris.

Alvin and Theon had walked only a few yards when they found themselves in a large and incredibly untidy room cluttered up with a bewildering variety of objects. One end of the chamber was occupied by domestic machines—synthesizers, destructors, cleaning equipment and the like—which one normally expected to be concealed from sight in the walls and floors.

Around these were piled cases of thought records and transcribers, forming pyramids that reached almost to the ceiling. The whole room was uncomfortably hot, owing to the presence of a dozen perpetual fires scattered about the floor. Attracted by the radiation Krif flew towards the nearest of the metal spheres, stretched his wings luxuriously before it and fell instantly asleep.

It was a little while before the boys noticed the old man and his three machines waiting for them in a small open space which reminded Alvin of a clearing in the jungle. There was a certain amount of furniture here—a table and three comfortable couches. One of these was old and shabby but the others were so conspicuously new that Alvin was certain they had been created in the last few minutes.

Even as he watched the familiar warning glow of the synthesizer field flickered over the table and their host waved silently towards it. They thanked him formally and began to sample the food and drink that had suddenly appeared. Alvin realized that he had grown a little tired of the unvarying output from Theon's portable synthesizer and the change was very welcome.

They ate in silence for awhile, stealing a glance now and then at the old man. He seemed sunk in his own thoughts and appeared to have forgotten them completely—but as soon as they had finished he looked up and began to question them.

When Alvin explained that he was a native not of Lys, but of Diaspar, the old fellow showed no particular surprise. Theon did his best to deal with the queries. For one who disliked visitors their host seemed very anxious to have news of the outer world. Alvin quickly decided that his earlier

attitude must have been a pose.

Presently he fell silent again. The two boys waited with what patience they could: he had told them nothing of himself or what he was doing in Shalmirane. The light signal that had drawn them there was still as great a mystery as ever, yet they did not care to ask outright for an explanation.

So they sat in an uncomfortable silence, their eyes wandering round that amazing room, finding something new and unexpected at every moment. At last Alvin broke into the old man's reverie.

"We must leave soon," he remarked.

It was not a statement so much as a hint. The wrinkled face turned towards him, but the eyes were still very far away. Then the tired, infinitely-ancient voice began to speak. It was so quiet and low that at first they could scarcely hear. After awhile the old man must have noticed their difficulty, for of a sudden the three machines began once more to echo his words.

MUCH that he told them they could never understand. Sometimes he used words which were unknown to them. At other times he spoke as if repeating sentences or whole speeches that others must have written long ago. But the main outlines of the story were clear and they took Alvin's thoughts back to the ages of which he had dreamed since his childhood.

The tale began, like so many others, amid the chaos of the Transition Centuries when the Invaders had gone but the world was still recovering from its wounds. At that time there appeared in Lys the man who later became known as the Master. He was accompanied by three strange machines—the very ones that were watching them now—which acted as his servants and also possessed definite intelligences of their own.

His origin was a secret he never disclosed and eventually it was assumed that he had come from space, somehow penetrating the blockade of the Invaders. Far away among the stars there might still be islands of humanity which the tide of war had not yet engulfed.

The Master and his machines possessed powers which the world had lost and around him he gathered a group of men to whom he taught much wisdom. His personality must have been a very striking one and Alvin could understand dimly the magnetism that had drawn so many to him.

From the dying cities men had come to Lys in their thousands, seeking rest and peace of mind after the years of confusion. Here among the forests and mountains, listening to the Master's words, they found that peace at last.

At the close of his long life the Master had asked his friends to carry him out into the open so that he could watch the stars. He had waited, his strength waning, until the culmination of the Seven Suns. As he died the resolution with which he had kept his secret so long seemed to weaken and he babbled many things of which countless books were to be written in future ages.

Again and again he spoke of the "Great Ones" who had now left the world, but who would surely one day return, and he charged his followers to remain to greet them when they came. Those were his last rational words. He was never again conscious of his surroundings, but just before the end he uttered one phrase that revealed part at least of his secret and had come down the ages to haunt the minds of all who heard it.

"It is lovely to watch the colored shadows on the planets of eternal light." Then he died.

So arose the religion of the Great Ones, for a religion it now became. At the Master's death many of his followers broke away, but others remained faithful to his teachings, which they slowly elaborated through the ages.

At first they believed that the Great Ones, whoever they were, would soon return to Earth, but that hope faded with the passing centuries. Yet the brotherhood continued, gathering new members from the lands around, and slowly its strength and power increased until it dominated the whole of Southern Lys.

It was very hard for Alvin to follow the old man's narrative. The words were used so strangely that he could not tell what was truth and what legend—if, indeed, the story held any truth at all. He had only a confused picture of generations of fanatical men, waiting for some great event which they did not understand to take place at some unknown future date.

The Great Ones never returned. Slowly the power of the movement failed, and the people of Lys drove it into the mountains until it took refuge in Shalmirane. Even then the watchers did not lose their faith, but swore that however long the wait they would

be ready when the Great Ones came.

Long ago men had learned one way of defying Time and the knowledge had survived when so much else had been lost. Leaving only a few of their number to watch over Shalmirane the rest went into the dreamless sleep of suspended animation.

Their numbers slowly falling as sleepers were awakened to replace those who died, the watchers kept faith with the Master. From his dying words it seemed certain that the Great Ones lived on the planets of the Seven Suns and, in later years, attempts were made to send signals into space.

Long ago the signaling had become no more than a meaningless ritual and now the story was nearing its end. In a very little while only the three machines would be left in Shalmirane, watching over the bones of the men who had come here so long ago in a cause that they alone could understand.

The thin voice died away and Alvin's thoughts returned to the world he knew. More than ever before the extent of his ignorance overwhelmed him. A tiny fragment of the past had been illuminated for a little while but now the darkness had closed over it again.

THE world's history was a mass of such disconnected threads, and none could say which were important and which were trivial. This fantastic tale of the Master and the Great Ones might be no more than another of the countless legends that had somehow survived from the civilizations of the Dawn.

Yet the three machines were unlike any that Alvin had ever seen. He could not dismiss the whole story, though he was tempted to, as a fable built of self-delusion upon a foundation of madness.

"These machines," he said abruptly, "surely they've been questioned? If they came to Earth with the Master they must still know his secrets."

The old man smiled wearily.

"*They* know," he said, "but they will never speak. The Master saw to that before he handed over the control. We have tried times without number, but it is useless."

Alvin understood. He thought of the Associator in Diaspar and the seals that Alaine had set upon its knowledge. Even those seals, he now believed, could be broken in time and the Master Associator must be infinitely more complex than these little robot slaves. He wondered if Rorden, so skilled in unraveling the secrets of the past, would be able to wrest the machines' hidden knowledge for them. But Rorden was far away and would never leave Diaspar.

Quite suddenly the plan came fully fledged into his mind. Only a very young person could ever have thought of it and it taxed even Alvin's self-confidence to the utmost. Yet once the decision had been made he moved with determination and much cunning toward his goal.

He pointed towards the three machines.

"Are they identical?" he asked. "I mean, can each one do everything, or are they specialized in any way?"

The old man looked a little puzzled. "I've never thought about it," he said. "When I need anything I ask whichever is most convenient. I don't think there is any difference between them."

"There can't be a great deal of work for them to do now," Alvin continued innocently. Theon looked a little startled, but Alvin carefully avoided his friend's eye. The old answered guilelessly.

"No," he replied sadly, "Shalmirane is very different now."

Alvin paused in sympathy. Then, very quickly, he began to talk. At first the old man did not seem to grasp his proposal. Later, when comprehension came, Alvin gave him no time to interrupt.

He spoke of the great storehouses of knowledge in Diaspar and the skill with which the Keeper of the Records could use them. Although the Master's machines had withstood all other enquirers they might yield their secrets to Rorden's probing. It would be a tragedy if the chance were missed, for it would never come again.

Flushed with the heat of his own oratory, Alvin ended his appeal: "Lend me one of the machines—you do not need them all. Order it to obey my controls and I will take it to Diaspar. I promise to return it whether the experiment succeeds or not."

Even Theon looked shocked and an expression of horror came across the old man's face.

"I couldn't do that!" he gasped.

"But why not? Think what we might learn!"

The other shook his head firmly.

"It would be against the Master's wishes."

Alvin was disappointed—disappointed and annoyed. But he was young and his op-

ponent was old and tired. He began again to go through the argument, shifting his attack and pressing home each advantage. And now for the first time Theon saw an Alvin he had never suspected before—a personality, indeed, that was surprising Alvin himself.

The men of the Dawn Ages had never let obstacles bar their way for long and the will power and determination that had been their heritage had not yet passed from Earth. Even as a child Alvin had withstood the forces seeking to mold him to the pattern of Diaspar. He was older now and against him was not the greatest city of the world but only an aged man who sought nothing but rest and would surely find that soon.

CHAPTER IX

Master of the Robot

EVENING was far advanced when the ground-car slid silently through the last screen of trees and came to rest in the great glade of Airlee. The argument, which had lasted most of the journey, had now died away and peace had been restored. They had never quite come to blows, perhaps because the odds were so unequal. Theon had only Krif to support him, but Alvin could call upon the argus-eyed, many-tentacled machine he still regarded so lovingly.

Theon had not minced his words. He had called his friend a bully and had told Alvin that he should be thoroughly ashamed of himself. But Alvin had only laughed and continued to play with his new toy.

He did not know how the transfer had been effected, but he alone could control the robot now, could speak with its voice and see through its eyes. It would obey no one else in all the world.

Seranis was waiting for them in a surprising room which seemed to have no ceiling, though Alvin knew that there was a floor above it. She seemed to be worried and more uncertain than he had ever seen her before and he remembered the choice that might soon lie before him.

Until now he had almost forgotten it. He had believed that, somehow, the Council would resolve the difficulty. Now he realized that its decision might not be to his liking.

The voice of Seranis was troubled when she began to speak and, from her occasional pauses, Alvin could tell that she was repeating words already rehearsed.

"Alvin," she began, "there are many things I did not tell you before but which you must learn now if you are to understand our actions.

"You know one of the reasons for the isolation of our two races. The fear of the Invaders, that dark shadow in the depths of every human mind, turned your people against the world and made them lose themselves in their own dreams.

"Here in Lys that fear has never been so great, although we bore the burden of the attack. We had a better reason for our actions and what we did we did with open eyes.

"Long ago, Alvin, men sought immortality and at last achieved it. They forgot that a world which had banished death must also banish birth. The power to extend his life indefinitely brought contentment to the individual but stagnation to the race.

"You once told me that you were the only child to be born in Diaspar for seven thousand years—but you have seen how many children we have here in Airlee. Ages ago we sacrificed our immortality, but Diaspar still follows the false dream. That is why our ways parted—*and why they must never meet again.*"

Although the words had been more than half expected the blow seemed none the less for its anticipation. Yet Alvin refused to admit the failure of all his plans—half-formed though they were—and only part of his brain was listening to Seranis now.

He understood and noted all her words, but the conscious portion of his mind was retracing the road to Diaspar, trying to imagine every obstacle that could be placed in his way.

Seranis was clearly unhappy. Her voice was almost pleading as it spoke and Alvin knew that she was talking not only to him but to her own son. Theon was watching his mother with a concern which held at last more than a trace of accusation.

"We have no desire to keep you here in Lys against your will, but you must surely realize what it would mean if our people mixed. Between our culture and yours is a gulf as great as any that ever separated Earth from its ancient colonies.

"Think of this one fact, Alvin—you and Theon are now of nearly the same age—*but he and I will have been dead for cen-*

turies when you are still *a boy.*"

The room was very quiet, so quiet that Alvin could hear the strange, plaintive cries of unknown beasts in the fields beyond the village. Presently he said, almost in a whisper: "What do you want me to do?"

"I have put your case to the council as I promised, but the law cannot be altered. You may remain here and become one of us or you may return to Diaspar. If you do that we must first reshape the patterns of your mind so that you have no recollection of Lys and never again attempt to reach us."

"And Rorden? He would still know the truth, even if I had forgotten everything."

"We have spoken with Rorden many times since you left. He recognizes the wisdom of our actions."

IN THAT dark moment it seemed to Alvin that the whole world had turned against him. Though there was much truth in the words of Seranis he would not recognize it. He saw only the wreck of his still dimly-conceived plans, the end of the search for knowledge that had now become the most important thing in his life.

Seranis must have read his thoughts.

"I'll leave you for awhile," she said. "But remember—whatever your choice, there can be no turning back."

Theon followed her to the door but Alvin called after him. He looked inquiringly at his mother, who hesitated for a moment and then nodded her head. The door closed silently behind her and Alvin knew that it would not open again without her consent.

Alvin waited until his racing thoughts were once more under control.

"Theon," he began, "you'll help me, won't you?"

The other nodded but did not speak.

"Then tell me this—how could your people stop me if I tried to run away?"

"That would be easy. If you tried to escape my mother would take control of your mind. Later, when you became one of us, you would not wish to leave."

"I see. Can you tell if she is watching my mind now?"

Theon looked worried, but his protest answered the question.

"I shouldn't tell you that!"

"But you will, won't you?"

The two boys looked silently at each other for many seconds. Then Theon smiled.

"You can't bully me, you know. Whatever you're planning— and *I* can't read your mind—as soon as you tried to put it into action Mother would take over. She won't let you out of her sight until everything has been settled."

"I know that," said Alvin, "but is she looking into my mind at this moment?"

The other hesitated.

"No, she isn't," he said at last. "I think she's deliberately leaving you alone, so that her thoughts won't influence you."

That was all he needed to know. For the first time Alvin dared to turn his mind upon the only plan that offered any hope. He was far too stubborn to accept either of the alternatives Seranis had offered him and even if there had been little at stake he would have bitterly resisted any attempt to override his will.

In a little while Seranis would return. He could do nothing until they were in the open again and even then Seranis would be able to control his actions if he attempted to run away. Apart from that he was sure that many of the villagers could intercept him long before he reached safety.

Very carefully, checking every detail, he traced out the only road that could lead him back to Diaspar on the terms he wished.

Theon warned him when Seranis was near and he quickly turned his thoughts into harmless channels. It had never been easy for her to understand his mind and now it seemed to Seranis as if she were far out in space, looking down upon a world veiled with impenetrable clouds.

Sometimes there would be a rift in the covering and for an instant she could catch a glimpse of what lay beneath. She wondered what Alvin was trying to hide from her. For a moment she dipped into her son's mind, but Theon knew nothing of the other's plans.

She thought again of the precautions she had taken. As a man may flex his muscles before some great exertion she ran through the compulsion patterns she might have to use. But there was no trace of her preoccupation as she smiled at Alvin from the doorway.

"Well," she asked, "have you made up your mind?"

Alvin's reply seemed frank enough.

"Yes," he said. "I will return to Diaspar."

"I'm sorry and I know that Theon will miss you. But perhaps it's best. This is not your world and you must think of your own people."

With a gesture of supreme confidence she stood aside to let Alvin pass through the door.

"The men who can obliterate your memory of Lys are waiting for you. We expected this decision."

ALVIN was glad to see that Seranis was leading him in the direction he wished to go. She did not look back to see if he was following. Her every movement told him, "Try and run away if you like—my mind is more powerful than yours." And he knew that it was perfectly true.

They were clear of the houses when he stopped and turned to his friend.

"Good-by, Theon," he said, holding out his hands. "Thank you for all you've done. One day I'll be back."

Seranis had stopped and was watching him intently. He smiled at her even while he measured the twenty feet of ground between them.

"I know that you're doing this against your will," he said, "and I don't blame you for it. I don't like what I'm doing, either." That was not true, he thought. Already he was beginning to enjoy himself.

He glanced quickly around. No one was approaching and Seranis had not moved. She was still watching him, probably trying to probe his mind. He talked quickly to prevent even the outlines of his plan from shaping among his thoughts.

"I do not believe you are right," he said, so unconscious of his intellectual arrogance that Seranis could not resist a smile. "It's wrong for Lys and Diaspar to remain apart forever. One day they may need each other desperately. So I am going home with all that I have learned—*and I do not think that you can stop me.*"

He waited no longer and it was just as well. Seranis never moved, but instantly he felt his body slipping from his control. The power that had brushed aside his own will was even greater than he had expected and he realized that many hidden minds must be aiding Seranis. Helplessely he began to walk back towards the center of the village and for an awful moment he thought his plans had failed.

Then there came a flash of steel and crystal and the metal arms closed swiftly around him. His body fought against them, as he had known it must do, but his struggles were useless. The ground fell away beneath him and he caught a glimpse of Theon, frozen by surprise with a foolish smile upon his face.

The robot was carrying him a dozen feet above the ground, much faster than a man could run. It took Seranis only a moment to understand his ruse and his struggles died away as she relaxed her control. But she was not defeated yet, and presently there happened that which Alvin had feared and done his best to counteract.

There were now two separate entities fighting inside his mind and one of them was pleading with the robot, begging it to set him down again. The real Alvin waited, breathlessly, resisting only a little against forces he knew he could not hope to fight.

He had gambled—there was no way of telling beforehand if the machine could understand orders as complex as those he had given it. Under no circumstances, he had told the robot, must it obey any further commands of his until he was safely inside Diaspar. Those were the orders. If they were obeyed Alvin had placed his fate beyond the reach of human interference.

Never hesitating, the machine raced on along the path he had so carefully mapped out for it. A part of him was still pleading angrily to be released, but he knew now that he was safe. And presently Seranis understood that too, for the forces inside his brain ceased to war with one another. Once more he was at peace as, ages earlier, another wanderer had been when, lashed to the mast of his ship, he heard the song of the Sirens die away across the wine-dark sea.

CHAPTER X

Duplication

"SO YOU see," concluded Alvin, "it will carry out any orders I give, no matter how complicated they are. But as soon as I ask questions about its origin it simply freezes like that."

The machine was hanging motionless above the Master Associator, its crystal lenses glittering in the silver light like a cluster of jewels. Of all the robots which Rorden had ever met this was by far the most baffling. He was now almost sure that it had been built by no human civilization. With such eternal servants it was not surprising that the Mas-

ter's personality had survived the ages.

Alvin's return had raised so many problems that Rorden was almost afraid to think of them. He himself had not found it easy to accept the existence of Lys, with all its implications, and he wondered how Diaspar would react to the new knowledge. Probably the city's immense inertia would cushion the shock. It might well be years before all its inhabitants fully appreciated the fact that they were no longer alone on Earth.

But if Alvin had his way things would move much more quickly than that. There were times when Rorden regretted the failure of Seranis' plans—everything would have been so much simpler.

The problem was immense and for the second time in his life Rorden could not decide what course of action was correct. He wondered how many more times Alvin would present him with such dilemmas and smiled a little wryly at the thought. For it would make no difference either way—Alvin would do exactly as he pleased.

As yet, not more than a dozen people outside of Alvin's own family knew the truth. His parents, with whom he now had so little in common and often did not see for weeks, still seemed to think that he had merely been to some outlying part of the city.

Jeserac had been the only person to react strongly. Once the initial shock had worn off he had engaged in a violent quarrel with Rorden and the two were no longer on speaking terms. Alvin, who had seen this coming for some time, could guess the details, but to his disappointment neither of the protagonists would talk about the matter.

Later there would be time enough to see that Diaspar realized the truth. For the moment Alvin was too interested in the robot to worry about much else. He felt, and his belief was now shared by Rorden, that the tale he had heard in Shalmirane was only a fragment of some far greater story.

At first Rorden had been skeptical and he still believed the Great Ones to be no more than another of the world's countless religious myths. Only the robot knew the truth and it had defied a million centuries of questioning as it was defying them now.

"The trouble is," said Rorden, "that there are no longer any engineers left in the world."

Alvin looked puzzled. Although contact with the Keeper of the Records had greatly enlarged his vocabulary there were thousands of archaic words he did not understand.

"An engineer," explained Rorden, "was a man who designed and built machines. It's impossible for us to imagine an age without robots—but every machine in the world had to be invented at one time or other and, until the Master Robots were built, they needed men to look after them.

"Once the machines could care for themselves human engineers were no longer required. I think that's a fairly accurate account, though of course it's mostly guesswork. Every machine we possess existed at the beginning of our history and many had disappeared long before it started."

"Such as flyers and spaceships," interjected Alvin.

"Yes," agreed Rorden, "as well as the great communicators that could reach the stars. All these things vanished when they were no longer needed."

Alvin shook his head.

"I still believe," he said, "that the disappearance of the spaceships can't be explained as easily as that. But to get back to the machine—do you think that the Master Robots could help us? I've never seen one, of course, and don't know much about them."

"Help us? In what way?"

"I'm not quite sure," said Alvin vaguely. "Perhaps they could force it to obey *all* my orders. They repair robots, don't they? I suppose that would be a kind of repair. . ."

His voice faded away as if he had failed even to convince himself.

RORDEN smiled. The idea was too ingenuous for him to put much faith in it. However, this piece of historical research was the first of all Alvin's schemes for which he himself could share much enthusiasm and he could think of no better plan at the moment.

He walked towards the Associator, above which the robot was still floating as if in studied indifference. As he began, almost automatically, to set up his questions on the great keyboard, he was suddenly struck by a thought so incongruous that he burst out laughing.

Alvin looked at his friend in surprise as Rorden turned towards him.

"Alvin," he said between chuckles, "I'm afraid we still have a lot to learn about machines." He laid his hand on the robot's smooth metal body. "They don't share many human feelings, you know. It wasn't really

necessary for us to do all our plotting in whispers."

This world, Alvin knew, had not been made for man. Under the glare of the trichromatic lights—so dazzling that they pained the eyes—the long, broad corridors seemed to stretch to infinity. Down these great passageways all the robots of Diaspar must come at the end of their patient lives, yet not once in a million years had they echoed to the sound of human feet.

It had not been difficult to locate the maps of the underground city, the city of machines without which Diaspar could not exist. A few hundred yards ahead the corridor would open into a circular chamber more than a mile across, its roof supported by great columns that must also bear the unimaginable weight of Power Center. Here, if the maps spoke the truth, the Master Robots, greatest of all machines, kept watch over Diaspar.

The chamber was there and it was even vaster than Alvin had imagined—but where were the machines? He paused in wonder at the tremendous but meaningless panorama beneath him. The corridor ended high in the wall of the chamber—surely the largest cavity ever built by man—and on either side long ramps swept down to the distant floor.

Covering the whole of that brilliantly-lit expanse were hundreds of great white structures, so unexpected that, for a moment, Alvin thought he must be looking down upon a subterranean city. The impression was startlingly vivid and it was one he never wholly lost. Nowhere at all was the sight he had expected—the familiar gleam of metal which, since the beginning of time, man had learned to associate with his servants.

Here was the end of an evolution almost as long as Man's. Its beginning was lost in the mists of the Dawn Ages when humanity had first learned the use of power and sent its noisy engines clanking about the world. Steam, water, wind—all had been harnessed for a little while and then abandoned.

For centuries the energy of matter had run the world until it too had been superseded and, with each change, the old machines were forgotten and the new ones took their place. Very slowly, over millions of years, the ideal of the perfect machine was approached—that ideal which had once been a dream, then a distant prospect and, at last, reality.

"No machine may contain any moving parts."

Here was the ultimate expression of that ideal. Its achievement had taken Man perhaps a thousand million years and, in the hour of his triumph, he had turned his back upon the machine forever.

The robot they were seeking was not as large as many of its companions, but Alvin and Rorden felt dwarfed when they stood beneath it. The five tiers with their sweeping horizontal lines gave the impression of some crouching beast and, looking from it to his own robot, Alvin thought it strange that the same word should be used for both.

SOME three feet from the ground a wide transparent panel ran the whole length of the structure. Alvin pressed his forehead against the smooth, curiously warm material and peered into the machine.

At first he saw nothing—then, by shielding his eyes, he could distinguish thousands of faint points of light hanging in nothingness. They were ranged one beyond the other in a three-dimensional lattice, as strange and as meaningless to him as the stars must have been to ancient man.

Rorden had joined him and together they stared into the brooding monster. Though they watched for many minutes the colored lights never moved from their places and their brilliance never changed. Presently Alvin broke away from the machine and turned to his friend.

"What are they?" he asked in perplexity.

"If we could look into our own minds," said Rorden, "they would mean as little to us. The robots seem motionless because we cannot see their thoughts."

For the first time Alvin looked at the long avenue of titans with some trace of understanding. All his life he had accepted without question the miracle of the Synthesizers, the machines which age after age produced in an unending stream all that the city needed. Thousands of times he had watched that act of creation, never thinking that somewhere must exist the protoype of that which he had seen come into the world.

As a human mind may dwell for a little while upon a single thought, so these greater brains could graps and hold forever the most intricate ideas. The patterns of all created things were frozen in these eternal minds, needing only the touch of a human will to make them reality.

The world had gone very far since, hour upon hour, the first cavemen had patiently chipped their arrowheads and knives from

the stubborn stone.

"Our problem now," said Rorden, "is to get into touch with the creature. It can never have any direct knowledge of man, for there's no way in which we can affect its consciousness. If my information is correct, there must be an interpreting machine somewhere.

"That was a type of robot that could convert human instructions into commands that the Master Robots could understand. They were pure intelligence with little memory—just as this is a tremendous memory with relatively little intelligence."

Alvin considered for a moment. Then he pointed to his own robot.

"Why not use it?" he suggested. "Robots have very literal minds. It won't refuse to pass on our instructions, for I doubt if the Master ever thought of this situation."

Rorden laughed. "I don't suppose he did, but as there's a machine specially built for the job I think it would be best to use it."

The Interpreter was a very small affair, a horseshoe shaped construction built round a vision screen which lit up as they approached. Of all the machines in this great cavern, it was the only one which had shown any cognizance of man, and its greeting seemed a little contemptuous. For on the screen appeared the words:

STATE YOUR PROBLEM

PLEASE THINK CLEARLY

Ignoring the implied insult, Alvin began his story. Though he had communicated with robots by speech or thought on countless occasions, he felt now that he was addressing something more than a machine. Lifeless though this creature was it possessed an intelligence that might be greater than his own. It was a strange thought, but it did not depress his unduly—for of what use was intelligence alone?

His words died away and the silence of that overpowering place crowded back upon them. For a moment the screen was filled with swirling mist: then the haze cleared and the machine replied:

REPAIR IMPOSSIBLE

ROBOT UNKNOWN TYPE

Alvin turned to his friend with a gesture of disappointment, but even as he did so the lettering changed and a second message appeared:

DUPLICATION COMPLETED

PLEASE CHECK AND SIGN

Simultaneously a red light began to flash above a horizontal panel Alvin had not noticed before and was certain he must have seen had it been there earlier. Puzzled, he bent towards it, but a shout from Rorden made him look round in surprise. The other was pointing towards the great Master Robot, where Alvin had left his own machine a few minutes before.

It had not moved, but it had multiplied. Hanging in the air beside it was a duplicate so exact that Alvin could not tell which was the original and which the copy.

"I was watching when it happened," said Rorden excitedly. "It suddenly seemed to extend, as if millions of replicas had come into existence on either side of it. Then all the images except these two disappeared. The one on the right is the original."

CHAPTER XI

The Council

ALVIN was still stunned, but slowly he began to realize what must have happened. His robot could not be forced to disobey the orders given it so long ago, but a duplicate could be made with all its knowledge yet with the unbreakable memory-block removed. Beautiful though the solution was the mind would be unwise to dwell too long upon the powers that made it possible.

The robots moved as one when Alvin called them towards him. Speaking his commands, as he often did for Rorden's benefit, he asked again the question he had put so many times in different forms.

"Can you tell me how your first master reached Shalmirane?"

Rorden wished his mind could intercept the soundless replies, of which he had never been able to catch even a fragment. But this time there was little need, for the glad smile that spread across Alvin's face was sufficient answer.

The boy looked at him triumphantly.

"Number One is just the same," he said, "but Two is willing to talk."

"I think we should wait until we're home again before we begin to ask questions," said Rorden, practical as ever. "We'll need the Associators and Recorders when we start."

Impatient though he was, Alvin had to admit the wisdom of the advice. As he turned to go, Rorden smiled at his eagerness and said quietly:

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

The red light on the Interpreter was still flashing, and its message still glowed on the screen.

PLEASE CHECK AND SIGN

Alvin walked to the machine and examined the panel above which the light was blinking. Set in it was a window of some almost invisible substance, supporting a stylus which passed vertically through it. The point of the stylus rested on a sheet of white material which already bore several signatures and dates.

The last of them was almost fifty thousand years ago and Alvin recognized the name as that of a recent President of the Council. Above it only two names were visible, neither of which meant anything to him or to Rorden. Nor was this very surprising, for they had been written twenty-three million and fifty-seven million years before.

Alvin could see no purpose for this ritual, but he knew that he could never fathom the workings of the minds that had built this place. With a slight feeling of unreality he grasped the stylus and began to write his name.

The instrument seemed completely free to move in the horizontal plane, for in that direction the window offered no more resistance than the wall of a soap-bubble. Yet his full strength was incapable of moving it vertically. He knew because he tried.

Carefully he wrote the date and released the stylus. It moved slowly back across the sheet to its original position—and the panel with its winking light was gone.

As Alvin walked away he wondered why his predecessors had come here and what they had sought from the machine. No doubt, thousands or millions of years in the future, other men would look into that panel and ask themselves, "Who was Alvin of Loronei?" *Or would they?* Perhaps they would exclaim instead, "Look! Here's Alvin's signature!"

The thought was not untypical of him in his present mood, but he knew better than to share it with his friend.

At the entrance to the corridor they looked back across the cave and the illusion was stronger than ever. Lying beneath them was a dead city of strange white buildings, a city bleached by the fierce light not meant for human eyes.

Dead it might be, for it had never lived, but Alvin knew that when Diaspar had passed away these machines would still be here, never turning their minds from the thoughts greater men than he had given them long ago.

They spoke little on the way back through the streets of Diaspar, streets bathed with sunlight which seemed pale and wan after the glare of the machine city. Each in his own way was thinking of the knowledge that would soon be his and neither had any regard for the beauty of the great towers drifting past or the curious glances of their fellow citizens.

[*Turn page*]

IT WAS strange, thought Alvin, how everything that had happened to him led up to this moment. He knew well enough that men were makers of their own destinies, yet since he had met Rorden events seemed to have moved automatically towards a predetermined goal.

Alaine's message—Lys—Shalmirane—at every stage he might have turned aside with unseeing eyes, but something had led him on. It was pleasant to pretend that Fate had favored him, but his rational mind knew better. Any man might have found the path his footsteps had traced and, countless times in the past ages, others must have gone almost as far. He was simply the first to be lucky.

The first to be lucky. The words echoed mockingly in his ears as they stepped through the door of Rorden's chamber. Quietly waiting for them, with hands folded patiently across his lap, was a man wearing a curious garb unlike any that Alvin had ever seen before. He glanced enquiringly at Rorden, and was instantly shocked by the pallor of his friend's face. Then he knew who the visitor was.

He rose as they entered and made a stiff, formal bow. Without a word he handed a small cylinder to Rorden, who took it woodenly and broke the seal. The almost unheard-of rarity of a written message made the silent exchange doubly impressive. When he had finished Rorden returned the cylinder with another slight bow at which, in spite of his anxiety, Alvin could not resist a smile.

Rorden appeared to have recovered himself quickly, for when he spoke his voice was perfectly normal.

"It seems that the Council would like a word with us, Alvin. I'm afraid we've kept it waiting."

Alvin had guessed as much. The crisis had come sooner—much sooner than he had expected. He was not, he told himself, afraid of the Council, but the interruption was maddening. His eyes strayed involuntarily to the robots.

"Yu'll have to leave them behind," said Rorden firmly.

Their eyes met and clashed. Then Alvin glanced at the Messenger.

"Very well," he said quietly.

The party was very silent on its way to the Council Chamber. Alvin was marshalling the arguments he had never properly thought out, believing they would not be needed for many years. He was far more annoyed than alarmed and he felt angry at himself for being so unprepared.

They waited only a few minutes in the anteroom, but it was long enough for Alvin to wonder why, if he was unafraid, his legs felt so curiously weak. Then the great doors contracted, and they walked towards the twenty men gathered round their famous table.

This, Alvin knew, was the first Council Meeting in his lifetime and he felt a little flattered as he noticed that there were no empty seats. He had never known that Jeserac was a Council member. At his startled gaze the old man shifted uneasily in his chair and gave him a furtive smile as if to say, "This is nothing to do with me." Most of the other faces Alvin had expected and only two were quite unknown to him.

The President began to address them in a friendly voice, and, looking at the familiar faces before him, Alvin could see no great cause for Rorden's alarm. His confidence began to return. Rorden, he decided, was something of a coward.

In that he did his friend less than justice, for although courage had never been one of Rorden's most conspicuous qualities, his worry concerned his ancient office almost as much as himself. Never in history had a Keeper of the Records been relieved of his position. Rorden was very anxious not to create a precedent.

In the few minutes since he had entered the Council Chamber Alvin's plans had undergone a remarkable change. The speech he had so carefully rehearsed was forgotten. The fine phrases he had been practising were reluctantly discarded. To his support now had come his most treacherous ally—that sense of the ridiculous which had always made it impossible for him to take very seriously even the most solemn occasions.

The Council might meet once in a thousand years. It might control the destinies of Diaspar but those who sat upon it were only tired old men. Alvin knew Jeserac and he did not believe that the others would be very different.

He felt a disconcerting pity for them, and suddenly remembered the words Seranis had spoken to him in Lys—"Ages ago we sacrificed our immortality, but Diaspar still follows the false dream." That in truth these men had done and he did not believe it had brought them happiness.

SO WHEN, at the President's invitation, Alvin began to describe his journey to Lys, he was to all appearances no more than a boy who had by chance stumbled on a discovery he thought of little importance. There was no hint of any plan or deeper purpose.

Only natural curiosity had led him out of Diaspar. It might have happened to anyone, yet he contrived to give the impression that he expected a little praise for his cleverness. Of Shalmirane and the robots he said nothing at all.

It was quite a good performance though Alvin was the only person who could fully appreciate it. The Council as a whole seemed favourably impressed, but Jeserac wore an expression in which relief struggled with incredulity. At Rorden Alvin dared not look.

When he had quite finished there was a brief silence while the Council considered his statement. Then the President spoke again.

"We fully appreciate," he said, choosing his words with obvious care, "that you had the best of motives in what you did. However, you have created a somewhat difficult situation for us. Are you quite sure that your discovery was accidental and that no one, shall we say, *influenced* you in any way?" His eyes wandered thoughtfully towards Rorden.

For the last time, Alvin yielded to the mischievous promptings of his mind.

"I wouldn't say that," he replied, after an appearance of considerable thought. There was a sudden quickening of interest among the Council Members and Rorden stirred uneasily by his side. Alvin gave his audience a smile that lacked nothing of candor and added quickly in a guileless voice, "I'm sure I owe a great deal to my tutor."

At this unexpected and singularly misleading compliment all eyes were turned upon Jeserac, who became a deep red, started to speak, then thought better of it. There was an awkward silence until the President stepped into the breach.

"Thank you," he said hastily. "You will remain here while we consider your statement."

There was an audible sigh of relief from Rorden—and that was the last sound Alvin heard for some time. A blanket of silence had descended upon him and, although he could see the Council arguing heatedly, not a word of its deliberations reached him. It was amusing at first, but the spectacle soon became tedious and he was glad when the silence lifted again.

"We have come to the conclusion," said the President, "that there had been an unfortunate mishap for which no one can be held responsible—although we consider that the Keeper of the Records should have informed us sooner of what was happening.

"However, it is perhaps as well that this dangerous discovery has been made, for we can now take suitable steps to prevent its recurrence. We will deal ourselves with the transport system you have located, and you" —turning to Rorden for the first time—"will insure that all references to Lys are removed from the Records."

There was a murmur of applause and expressions of satisfaction spread across the faces of the Councillors. A difficult situation had been speedily dealt with, they had avoided the unpleasant necessity of reprimanding Rorden and now they could go their ways again feeling that they, the chief citizens of Diaspar, had done their duty. With reasonably good fortune it might be centuries before the need arose again.

Even Rorden, disappointed though he was for Alvin's sake as well as his own, felt relieved at the outcome. Things might have been very much worse.

A voice he had never heard before cut into his reverie and froze the Councillors in their seats, the complacent smiles slowly ebbing from their faces.

"And precisely why are you going to close the way to Lys?"

IT WAS some time before Rorden's mind, unwilling to recognize disaster, would admit that it was Alvin of Loronei who spoke.

The success of his subterfuge had given Alvin only a moment's satisfaction. Throughout the President's address his anger had been steadily rising as he realized that, despite all his cleverness, his plans were to be thwarted.

The feelings he had known in Lys when Seranis had presented her ultimatum came back with redoubled strength. He had won that contest and the taste of power was still sweet.

This time he had no robot to help him and he did not know what the outcome would be. But he no longer had any fear of these foolish old men who thought themselves the rulers of Diaspar. He had seen the real rulers of the city and had spoken to them

in the grave silence of their brilliant, buried world.

So, in his anger and arrogance, Alvin threw away his disguise and the Councillors looked in vain for the artless boy who had addressed them a little while ago.

"Why are you going to close the way to Lys?"

There was a long silence in the Council Room, but the lips of Jeserac twisted into a slow, secret smile. This Alvin was new to him, but it was less alien than the one who had spoken before.

The President chose at first to ignore the challenge. Perhaps he could not bring himself to believe that it was more than an innocent question, however violently it had been expressed.

"That is a matter of high policy which we cannot discuss here," he said pompously, "but Diaspar cannot risk contamination with other cultures." He gave Alvin a benevolent but slightly worried smile.

"It's rather strange," said Alvin coldly, "that in Lys I was told exactly the same thing about Diaspar." He was glad to see the start of annoyance, but gave his audience no time to reply.

"Lys," he continued, "is much larger than Diaspar and its culture is certainly not inferior. It's always known about us but has chosen not to reveal itself—as you put it, to avoid contamination. Isn't it obvious that we are *both* wrong?"

He looked expectantly along the line of faces, but nowhere was there any understanding of his words. Suddenly his anger against these leaden-eyed old men rose to a crescendo. The blood was throbbing in his cheeks and, though his voice was steadier now, it held a note of icy contempt which even the most pacific of the Councillors could no longer overlook.

"Our ancestors," began Alvin, "built an empire which reached to the stars. Men came and went at will among all those worlds—and now their descendants are afraid to stir beyond the walls of their city. *Shall I tell you why?"* He paused—there was no movement at all in the great, bare room.

"It is because we are afraid—afraid of something that happened at the beginning of history. I was told the truth in Lys, though I had guessed it long ago. Must we always hide like cowards in Diaspar, pretending that nothing else exists—because half a billion years ago the Invaders drove us back to Earth?"

He had put his finger on their secret fear, the fear that he had never shared and whose power he could therefore never understand. Let them do what they pleased—he had spoken the truth.

His anger drained away and he was himself again, as yet only a little alarmed at what he had done. He turned to the President in a last gesture of independence.

"Have I your permission to leave?"

Still no words were spoken, but the slight inclination of the head gave him his release. The great doors expanded before him, and not until long after they had closed again did the storm break upon the Council Chamber.

The President waited until the inevitable lull. Then he turned to Jeserac.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we should hear your views first."

Jeserac examined the remark for possible traps. Then he replied, "I think that Diaspar is now losing its most outstanding brain."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? By now young Alvin will be halfway to the Tomb of Yarlan Zey. No, we shouldn't interfere. I shall be very sorry to lose him, though he never cared very much for me." He sighed a little. "For that matter, he never cared a great deal for anyone save Alvin of Loronei."

CHAPTER XII

The Ship

NOT until an hour later was Rorden able to escape from the Council Chamber. The delay was maddening and, when he reached his rooms, he knew it was too late. He paused at the entrance, wondering if Alvin had left any message and realizing for the first time how empty the years ahead would be.

The message was there, but its contents were totally unexpected. Even when Rorden had read it several times he was still completely baffled.

Meet me at once in the Tower of Loranne.

Only once before had he been to the Tower of Loranne—when Alvin had dragged him

there to watch the sunset. That was years ago. The experience had been unforgettable, but the shadow of night sweeping across the desert had terrified him so much that he had fled, pursued by Alvin's entreaties. He had sworn that he would never go there again.

Yet here he was in that bleak chamber pierced with the horizontal ventilating shafts. There was no sign of Alvin, but when he called the boy's voice answered at once.

"I'm on the parapet. Come through the center shaft."

Rorden hesitated. There were many things he would much rather do. But a moment later he was standing beside Alvin with his back to the city and the desert stretching endlessly before him.

They looked at each other in slience for a little while. Then Alvin said, rather contritely, "I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

Rorden was touched and many truths he was about to utter died abruptly on his lips. Instead he replied, "The Council was too busy arguing with itself to bother about me." He chuckled. "Jeserac was putting up quite a spirited defense when I left. I'm afraid I misjudged him."

"I'm sorry about Jeserac."

"Perhaps it was an unkind trick to play on the old man, but I think he's rather enjoying himself. After all there was some truth in your remark. He was the first man to show you the ancient world and he has rather a guilty conscience."

For the first time Alvin smiled. "It's strange," he said, "but until I lost my temper I never really understood what I wanted to do. Whether they like it or not I'm going to break down the wall between Diaspar and Lys. But that can wait. It's no longer so important now."

Rorden felt a little alarmed.

"What do you mean?" he asked anxiously. For the first time he noticed that only one of the robots was with them on the parapet. "Where's the second machine?"

Slowly, Alvin raised his arm and pointed out across the desert, towards the broken hills and the long line of sand dunes, crisscrossed like frozen waves. Far away Rorden could see the unmistakable gleam of sunlight upon metal.

"We've been waiting for you," said Alvin quietly. "As soon as I left the Council I went straight to the robots. Whatever happened I was going to make sure that no one took them away before I'd learnt all they could teach me.

"It didn't take long, for they're not very intelligent and knew less than I'd hoped. *But I have found the secret of the Master.*" He paused for a moment, then pointed again at the almost invisible robot. "Watch!"

The glistening speck soared away from the desert and came to rest perhaps a thousand feet above the ground. At first, not knowing what to expect, Rorden could see no other change. Then, scarcely believing his eyes, he saw that a cloud of dust was slowly rising from the desert.

Nothing is more terrible than movement where no movement should ever be again, but Rorden was beyond surprise or fear when the great sand dunes began to slide apart. Beneath the desert something was stirring like a giant awakening from its sleep.

Presently there came to Rorden's ears the rumble of falling earth and the shriek of rock split asunder by irresistible force. Then, suddenly, a great geyser of sand erupted hundreds of feet into the air and the ground was hidden from sight.

SLOWLY the dust began to settle back into the jagged wound torn across the face of the desert. But Rorden and Alvin still kept their eyes fixed steadfastly upon the open sky which, a little while ago, had held only the waiting robot.

What Alvin was thinking Rorden could scarcely imagine. At last he knew what the boy had meant when he had said that nothing else was very important now. The great city behind them and the greater desert before, the timidity of the Council and the pride of Lys—all these seemed trival matters now.

The covering of earth and rock could blur but could not conceal the proud lines of the ship still ascending from the riven desert. As Rorden watched it slowly turned towards them until it had foreshortened to a circle. Then, very leisurely, the circle started to expand.

Alvin began to speak, rather quickly, as if the time were short.

"I still do not know who the Master was or why he came to Earth. The robot gives me the impression that he landed secretly and hid his ship where it could be easily found if he ever needed it again.

"In all the world there could have been no better hiding place than the Port of

Diaspar, which now lies beneath those sands and which even in his age must have been utterly deserted.

"He may have lived for a while in Diaspar before he went to Shalmirane—the road must still have been open in those days. But he never needed the ship again and all these ages it has been waiting out there beneath the sands."

The ship was now very close as the controlling robot guided it towards the parapet. Rorden could see that it was about a hundred feet long and sharply pointed at both ends. There appeared to be no windows or other openings, though the thick layer of earth made it impossible to be certain.

Suddenly they were spattered with dirt as a section of the hull opened outwards, and Rorden caught a glimpse of a small, bare room with a second door at its far end, The ship was now hanging only a foot away from the parapet, which it had approached very cautiously, like a sensitive, living thing.

Rorden had backed away from it as if he were afraid, which indeed was very near the truth. To him the ship symbolized all the terror and mystery of the universe and evoked as could no other object the racial fears which for so long had paralysed the will of the human race.

Looking at his friend, Alvin knew very well the thoughts that were passing through his brain. For almost the first time he realized that there were forces in men's minds over which they had no control and that the Council was deserving of pity rather than contempt.

In utter silence, the ship drew away from the tower. It was strange, Rorden thought, that for the second time in his life he had said good-by to Alvin. The little, closed world of Diaspar knew only one farewell and that was for eternity.

The ship was now only a dark stain against the sky, and of a sudden Rorden lost it altogether. He never saw its going but presently there echoed down from the heavens the most awe-inspiring of all the sounds that Man had ever made—the long-drawn thunder of air falling, mile after mile, into a tunnel drilled suddenly across the sky.

Even when the last echoes had died away into the desert Rorden never moved. He was thinking of the boy who had gone—wondering, as he had so often done, if he would ever understand that aloof and baffling mind.

Alvin would never grow up. To him the whole universe was a plaything, a puzzle to be unraveled for his own amusement. In his play he had now found the ultimate deadly toy which might wreck what was left of human civilization—but whatever the outcome, to him it would still be a game.

The sun was now low on the horizon and a chill wind was blowing from the desert. But still Rorden waited, conquering his fears and presently, for the first time in his life, he saw the stars.

Even in Diaspar, Alvin had never seen such luxury as that which lay before him when the inner door of the airlock slid aside. At first he did not understand its implications. Then he began to wonder, rather uneasily, how long this tiny world might be upon its journeying between the stars.

There were no controls of any kind, but the large oval screen which completely covered the far wall would have shown that this was no ordinary room. Ranged in a half circle before it were three low couches. The rest of the cabin was occupied by two tables, a number of most inviting chairs and many curious devices which, for the moment, Alvin could not identify.

When he had made himself comfortable in front of the screen he looked around for the robots. To his surprise, they had disappeared. Then he located them, neatly stowed away in recesses high up beneath the curved ceiling. Their action had been so completely natural that Alvin knew at once the purpose for which they had been intended.

He remembered the Master Robots—these were the Interpreters, without which no untrained human mind could control a machine as complex as a spaceship. They had brought the Master to Earth and then, as his servants, followed him into Lys. Now they were ready, as if intervening aeons had never been, to carry out their old duties once again.

ALVIN threw them an experimental command, and the great screen shivered into life. Before him was the Tower of Loranne, curiously foreshortened and apparently lying on its side. Further trails gave him views of the sky, of the city and of great expanses of desert. The definition was brilliant, almost unnaturally clear, although there seemed to be no actual magnification.

Alvin wondered if the ship itself moved as the picture changed, but could think of no way of discovering this. He experimented

for a little while until he could obtain any view he wished. Then he was ready to start.

"Take me to Lys." The command was a simple one, but how could the ship obey it when he himself had no idea of the direction? Alvin had never thought of this and when it did occur to him the machine was already moving across the desert at a tremendous speed. He shrugged his shoulders, thankfully accepting what he could not understand.

It was difficult to judge the scale of the picture racing up the screen, but many miles must be passing every minute. Not far from the city the color of the ground had changed abruptly to a dull grey, and Alvin knew that he was now passing over the bed of one of the lost oceans.

Once Diaspar must have been very near the sea, though there had never been any hint of this even in the most ancient records. Old though the city was, the oceans must have passed away long before its building.

Hundreds of miles later the ground rose sharply and the desert returned. Once Alvin halted his ship above a curious pattern of intersecting lines, showing faintly through the blanket of sand. For a moment it puzzled him.

Then he realized that he was looking down on the ruins of some forgotten city. He did not stay for long. It was heartbreaking to think that billions of men had left no other trace of their existence save these furrows in the sand.

The smooth curve of the horizon was breaking up at last, crinkling into mountains that were beneath him almost as soon as they were glimpsed. The machine was slowing now, slowing and falling to earth in a great arc a hundred miles in length.

And then below him was Lys, its forests and endless rivers forming a scene of such incomparable beauty that for a while he would go no further. To the east, the land was shadowed and the great lakes floated upon it like pools of darker night. But towards the sunset the waters danced and sparkled with light, throwing back towards him such colors as he had never imagined.

It was not difficult to locate Airlee—which was fortunate for the robots could guide him no further. Alvin had expected this, and felt glad to have discovered some limits to their powers. After a little experimenting, he brought his ship to rest on the hillside which had given him his first glimpse of Lys.

It was quite easy to control the machine. He had only to indicate his general desires and the robots attended to the details. They would, he imagined, probably ignore any dangerous or impossible orders, but he did not intend to try the experiment.

Alvin was fairly certain that no one could have seen his arrival. He thought this rather important, for he had no desire to engage in mental combat with Seranis again. His plans were still somewhat vague, but he was running no risks until he had re-established friendly relations.

The discovery that the original robot would no longer obey him was a considerable shock. When he ordered it from its little compartment it refused to move, but lay motionless, watching him dispassionately with its multiple eyes. To Alvin's relief the replica obeyed him instantly, but no amount of cajoling could make the prototype carry out even the simplest action.

Alvin worried for some time before the explanation of the mutiny occurred to him. For all their wonderful skills, the robots were not very intelligent and the events of the past hour must have been too much for the unfortunate machine. One by one it had seen all the Master's orders defied—those orders which it had obeyed with such singleness of purpose for so many millions of years.

It was too late for regrets now, but Alvin was sorry he had made only a single duplicate. For the borrowed robot had become insane.

Alvin met no one on the road to Airlee. It was strange to sit in the spaceship while his field of vision moved effortlessly along the familiar path and the whispering of the forest sounded in his ears. As yet he was unable to identify himself fully with the robot and the strain of controlling it was still considerable.

It was nearly dark when he reached Airlee and the little houses were floating in pools of light. Alvin kept to the shadows and had almost reached Seranis' home before he was discovered. Suddenly there was an angry, high-pitched buzzing and his view was blocked by a flurry of wings.

He recoiled involuntarily before the onslaught. Then he realized what had happened—Krif did not approve of anything that flew without wings and only Theon's presence had prevented him from attacking the robot on earlier occasions.

Not wishing to hurt the beautiful but stupid creature, Alvin brought the robot to a halt and endured as best he could the blows that seemed to be raining upon him. Though he was sitting in comfort a mile away, he could not avoid flinching and was glad when Theon came out to investigate.

CHAPTER XIII

The Crisis

AT HIS master's approach Krif departed, still buzzing balefully. In the silence that followed Theon stood looking at the robot for a while. Then he smiled.

"I'm glad you've come back. Or are you still in Diaspar?"

Now for the first time Alvin felt a twinge of envy as he realized how much quicker Theon's mind was than his own.

"No," he said, wondering as he did so how clearly the robot echoed his voice. "I'm in Airlee, not very far away. But I'm staying here for the present."

Theon laughed heartily.

"I think that's just as well," he said. "Mother's forgiven you, but the Central Council hasn't. There's a conference going on indoors now. I have to keep out of the way."

"What are they talking about?"

"I'm not supposed to know, but they asked me all sorts of questions about you. I had to tell them what happened in Shalmirane."

"That doesn't matter very much," replied Alvin. "A good many other things have happened since then. I'd like to have a talk with this Central Council of yours."

"Oh, the whole Council isn't here, naturally. But three of its members have been making inquiries ever since you left.

Alvin smiled. He could well believe it—wherever he went now he seemed to be leaving a trail of consternation behind him.

The comfort and security of the spaceship gave him a confidence he had seldom known before and he felt complete master of the situation as he followed Theon into the house. The door of the conference room was locked and it was some time before Theon could attract attention. Then the walls slid reluctantly apart and Alvin moved his robot swiftly forward into the chamber.

The room was the familiar one in which he had had his last interview with Seranis. Overhead the stars were twinkling as if there were no ceiling or upper floor and once again Alvin wondered how the illusion was achieved. The three councillors froze in their seats as he floated towards them, but only the slightest flicker of surprise crossed Seranis' face.

"Good evening," he said politely as if this vicarious entry were the most natural thing in the world. "I've decided to come back."

Their surprise exceeded his expectations. One of the councillors, a young man with greying hair, was the first to recover.

"How did you get here?" he gasped.

Alvin thought it wise to evade the question. The way in which it was asked made him suspicious and he wondered if the underground transport system had been put out of action.

"Why, just as I did last time," he lied.

Two of the councillors looked fixedly at the third, who spread his hands in a gesture of baffled resignation. Then the young man who had addressed him before spoke again.

"Didn't you have any—difficulty?"

"None at all," said Alvin, determined to increase their confusion. He saw that he had succeeded.

"I've come back," he continued, "under my own free will, but in view of our previous disagreement I'm remaining out of sight for the moment. If I appear personally will you promise not to try and restrict my movements again?"

No one said anything for a while and Alvin wondered what thoughts were being exchanged. Then Seranis spoke for them all.

"I imagine that there is little purpose in doing so. Diaspar must know all about us by now."

Alvin flushed slightly at the reproach in her voice.

"Yes, Diaspar knows," he replied. "And Diaspar will have nothing to do with you. It wishes to avoid contamination with an inferior culture."

It was most satisfying to watch the councillor's reactions, and even Seranis colored slightly at his words. If he could make Lys and Diaspar sufficiently annoyed with each other Alvin realized that his problem would be more than half solved. He was learning, still unconsciously, the lost art of statesmanship.

"But I don't want to stay out here

all night," he continued. "Have I your promise?"

SERANIS smiled. "Yes," she said, "we won't attempt to control you again. Though I don't think we were very successful before."

Alvin waited until the robot had returned. Very carefully he gave the machine its instructions and made it repeat them back. Then he left the ship and the airlock closed silently behind him.

There was a faint whisper of air but no other sound. For a moment a dark shadow blotted out the stars. Then the ship was gone. Not until it had vanished did Alvin realize his miscalculation. He had forgotten that the robots senses were very different from his own and the night was far darker than he had expected.

More than once he lost the path completely and several times he barely avoided colliding with trees. It was blackest of all in the forest and once something quite large came towards him through the undergrowth. There was the faintest crackling of twigs and two emerald eyes were looking steadfastly at him from the level of his waist.

He called softly and an incredibly long tongue rasped across his hand. A moment later a powerful body rubbed affectionately against him and departed without a sound. He had no idea what it could be.

Presently the lights of the village were shining through the trees ahead, but he no longer needed their guidance for the path beneath his feet had now become a river of dim blue fire.

The moss upon which he was walking was luminous and his footprints left dark patches which slowly disappeared behind him. It was a beautiful and entrancing sight and, when Alvin stooped to pluck some of the strange moss, it glowed for minutes in his cupped hands before its radiance died.

Theon was waiting for him outside the house and for the second time he was introduced to the three councillors. He noticed with some annoyance their barely concealed surprise. Not appreciating the unfair advantage it gave him he never cared to be reminded of his youth.

They said little while he refreshed himself and Alvin wondered what mental notes were being compared. He kept his mind as empty as he could until he had finished. Then he began to talk as he had never talked before.

His theme was Diaspar. He painted the city as he had last seen it, dreaming on the breast of the desert, its towers glowing like captive rainbows against the sky. From the treasure-house of memory he recalled the songs that the poets of old had written in praise of Diaspar and he spoke of the countless men who had burnt away their lives to increase its beauty.

No one now, he told them, could ever exhaust a hundredth of the city's treasures, however long he lived. For a while he described some of the wonders which the men of Diaspar had wrought. He tried to make them catch a glimpse at least of the loveliness which such artists as Shervane and Perildor had created for men's eternal admiration.

And he spoke also of Loronei, whose name he bore, and wondered a little wistfully if it were indeed true that his music was the last sound Earth had ever broadcast to the stars.

They heard him to the end without interruption or questioning. When he had finished it was very late and Alvin felt more tired than he could ever remember. The strain and excitement of the long day had told on him at last and quite suddenly he fell asleep.

Alvin was still tired when they left the village not long after dawn. Early though it was, they were not the first upon the road. By the lake they overtook the three councillors and both parties exchanged slightly self-conscious greetings.

Alvin knew perfectly well where the Committee of Investigation was going and thought it would be appreciated if he saved it some trouble. He stopped when they reached the foot of the hill and turned towards his companions.

"I'm afraid I misled you last night," he said cheerfully. "I didn't come to Lys by the old route, so your attempt to close it wasn't really necessary."

The councillors' faces were a study in relief and increased perplexity.

"Then how *did* you get here?" The leader of the Committee spoke, and Alvin could tell that he at least had begun to guess the truth. He wondered if he had intercepted the command his mind had just sent winging across the mountains. But he said nothing, and merely pointed in silence to the northern sky.

Too swiftly for the eye to follow, a needle

of silver light arched across the mountains, leaving a mile-long trail of incandescence. Twenty thousand feet above Lys it stopped. There was no deceleration, no slow braking of its colossal speed. It came to a halt instantly, so that the eye that had been following it moved on across a quarter of the heavens before the brain could arrest its motion.

DOWN from the skies crashed a mighty peal of thunder, the sound of air battered and smashed by the violence of the ship's passage. A little later the ship itself, gleaming splendidly in the sunlight, came to rest upon the hillside a hundred yards away.

It was difficult to say who was the most surprised, but Alvin was the first to recover. As they walked—very nearly running—towards the spaceship, he wondered if it normally traveled in this abrupt fashion. The thought was disconcerting, although there had been no sensation of movement on his first voyage.

Considerably more puzzling, however, was the fact that the day before this resplendent creature had been hidden beneath a thick layer of iron-hard rock. Not until Alvin had reached the ship, and burnt his fingers by incautiously resting them on the hull, did he understand what had happened.

Near the stern there were still traces earth, but it had been fused into lava. All the rest had been swept away, leaving uncovered the stubborn metal which neither time nor any natural force could ever touch.

With Theon by his side Alvin stood in the open door and looked back at the three silent councillors. He wondered what they were thinking, but their expressions gave no hint of their thoughts.

"I have a debt to pay in Shalmirane," he said. "Please tell Seranis we'll be back by noon."

The councillors watched until the ship, now moving quite slowly for it had only a little way to go, had disappeared into the south. Then the young man who led the group shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"You've always opposed us for wanting change," he said, "and so far you've won. But I don't think the future lies with either of our parties now. Lys and Diaspar have both come to the end of an era, and we must make the best of it."

There was silence for a little while. Then one of his companions spoke in a very thoughtful voice.

"I know nothing of archaeology, but surely that machine was too large to be an ordinary flyer. Do you think it could possibly have been—"

"A spaceship? If so, this *is* a crisis!"

The third man had also been thinking deeply.

"The disappearance of both flyers and spaceships is one of the greatest mysteries of the Interregnum. That machine may be either. For the moment we had better assume the worst. If it is in fact a spaceship we must at all costs prevent that boy from leaving Earth. There is the danger that he may attract the Invaders again. That would be the end."

A gloomy silence settled over the company until the leader spoke again.

"That machine came from Diaspar," he said slowly. "Someone there must know the truth. I think we had better get in touch with our cousins—if they'll condescend to speak to us."

Sooner than he had any right to expect, the seed that Alvin had planted was beginning to flower.

The mountains were still swimming in shadow when they reached Shalmirane. From this height the great bowl of the fortress looked very small. It seemed impossible that the fate of Earth had once depended on that tiny ebon disc.

When Alvin brought the ship to rest among the ruins the desolation crowded upon him, chilling his soul. There was no sign of the old man or his machines and they had some difficulty in finding the entrance to the tunnel. At the top of the stairway Alvin shouted to give warning of their arrival. There was no reply and they moved quietly forward, in case he was asleep.

Sleeping he was, his hands folded peacefully upon his breast. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly up at the massive roof, as if they could see through to the stars beyond. There was a slight smile upon his lips. Death had not come to him as an enemy.

CHAPTER XIV

Out of the System

THE two robots were beside him, floating motionless in the air. When Alvin

tried to approach the body, their tentacles reached out to restrain him, so he came no nearer. There was nothing he could do.

As he stood in that silent room he felt an icy wind sweep through his heart. It was the first time he had looked upon the marble face of Death and he knew that something of his childhood had passed forever.

So this was the end of that strange brotherhood, perhaps the last of its kind the world would know. Deluded though they might have been, these men's lives had not been wholly wasted. As if by a miracle they had saved from the past knowledge that would else have been lost forever. Now their order could go the way of a million other faiths that had once thought themselves eternal.

They left him sleeping in his tomb among the mountains, where no man would disturb him until the end of Time. Guarding his body were the machines which had served him in life and which, Alvin knew, would never leave him now. Locked to his mind, they would wait here for the commands that could never come, until the mountains themselves had crumbled away.

The little four-legged animal which had once served man with the same devotion had been extinct too long for the boys ever to have heard of it.

They walked in silence back to the waiting ship and presently the fortress was once more a dark lake among the hills. But Alvin did nothing to check the machines. Still they rose until the whole of Lys lay spread beneath them, a great green island in an orange sea. Never before had Alvin been so high.

When finally they came to rest the whole crescent of the Earth was visible below. Lys was very small now, only a dark shadow against the gray and orange of the desert—but far around the curve of the globe something was glittering like a many-colored jewel. And thus for the first time Theon saw the city of Diaspar.

They sat for a long time watching the Earth turn beneath them. Of all Man's ancient powers, this surely was the one he could least afford to lose. Alvin wished he could show the world as he saw it now to the rulers of Lys and Diaspar.

"Theon," he said at last, "Do you think that what I'm doing is right?"

The question surprised Theon, who as yet knew nothing of the sudden doubts that sometimes overwhelmed his friend. Nor was it easy to answer dispassionately. Like Rorden, though with less cause, Theon felt that his own character was becoming submerged. He was being sucked helplessly into the vortex which Alvin left behind him on his way through life.

"I believe you are right," Theon answered slowly. "Our two peoples have been separated for long enough." That, he thought, was true, though he knew that his own feelings must bias his reply. But Alvin was still worried.

"There's one problem I haven't thought about until now," he continued in a troubled voice, "and that's the difference in our life spans." He said no more, but each knew what the other was thinking.

"I've been worrying about that a good deal," Theon admitted, "but I think the problem will solve itself when our people get to know each other again. We can't both be right—our lives may be too short and yours are certainly too long. In time there will be a compromise."

Alvin wondered. That way, it was true, lay the only hope, but the ages of transition would be hard indeed. He remembered again those bitter words of Seranis, *"We shall both be dead when you are still a boy."*

Very well—he would accept the conditions. Even in Diaspar all friendships lay under the same shadow. Whether it was a hundred or a million years away made little difference at the end. The welfare of the race demanded the mingling of the two cultures. In such a cause individual happiness was unimportant.

For a moment Alvin saw humanity as something more than the living background of his own life and he accepted without flinching the unhappiness his choice must one day bring. They never spoke of it again.

BENEATH them the world continued on its endless turning. Sensing his friend's mood, Theon said nothing and presently Alvin broke the silence again.

"When I first left Diaspar," he said, "I did not know what I hoped to find. Lys would have satisfied me once—but now everything on Earth seems so small and unimportant. Each discovery I've made has raised bigger questions and now I'll never be content until I know who the Master was and why he came to Earth. If I ever learn that, then I suppose I'll start to worry about

the Great Ones and the Invaders—and so it will go on."

Theon had never seen Alvin in so thoughtful a mood and did not wish to interrupt his soliloquy. He had learnt a great deal about his friend in the last few minutes.

"The robot told me," Alvin continued, "that this machine can reach the Seven Suns in less than half a day. Do you think I should go?"

"Do you think I could stop you?" Theon replied quietly.

Alvin smiled.

"That's no answer," he said, "even if it's true. We don't know what's out there in space. The Invaders may have left the Universe, but there may be other intelligences unfriendly to man."

"Why should there be?" Theon asked. "That's one of the questions our philosophers have been debating for ages. A truly intelligent race is not likely to be unfriendly."

"But the Invaders?"

Theon pointed to the unending deserts below.

"Once we had an Empire. What have we now that they would covet?"

Alvin was a little surprised at this novel point of view.

"Do all your people think like this?"

"Only a minority. The average person doesn't worry about it, but would probably say that, if the Invaders had really wanted to destroy Earth, they'd have done it ages ago. Only a few people, like Mother, are still afraid of them."

"Things are very different in Diaspar," Alvin said. "My people are great cowards. But it's unfortunate about your Mother—do you think she would stop you coming with me?"

"She most certainly would," Theon replied with emphasis. That Alvin had taken his own assent for granted he scarcely noticed.

Alvin thought for a moment. "By now she'll have heard about this ship and will know what I intend to do. We mustn't return to Airlee."

"No. That wouldn't be safe. But I have a better plan."

The little village in which they landed was only a dozen miles from Airlee, but Alvin was surprised to see how greatly it differed in architecture and setting. The houses were several stories in height and had been built along the curve of a lake, looking out across the water. A large number of brightly colored vessels were floating at anchor along the shore. They fascinated Alvin, who had never heard of such things and wondered what they were for.

He waited in the ship while Theon went to see his friends. It was amusing to watch the consternation and amazement of the people crowding round, unaware of the fact that he was observing them from inside the machine. Theon was gone only a few minutes and had some difficulty in reaching the airlock through the inquisitive crowds. He breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him.

"Mother will get the message in two or three minutes. I've not said where we're going, but she'll guess quickly enough. And I've got some news that will interest you."

"What is it?"

"The Central Council is going to hold talks with Diaspar."

"What!"

"It's perfectly true, though the announcement hasn't been made yet. That sort of thing can't be kept secret."

Alvin could appreciate this. He never understood how *anything* was ever kept secret in Lys.

"What are they discussing?"

"Probably ways in which they can stop us leaving. That's why I came back in a hurry."

Alvin smiled a little ruefully.

"So you think that fear may have succeeded where logic and persuasion failed?"

"Quite likely, though you made a real impression on the councillors last night. They were talking for a long time after you went to sleep."

WHATEVER the cause of this move Alvin felt very pleased. Diaspar and Lys had both been slow to react, but events were now moving swiftly to their climax. That the climax might have unpleasant consequences for him Alvin did not greatly mind.

They were very high when he gave the robot its final instructions. The ship had come almost to rest and the Earth was perhaps a thousand miles below, nearly filling the sky. It looked very uninviting. Alvin wondered how many ships in the past had hovered here for a little while and then continued on their way.

There was an appreciable pause, as if the

robot were checking controls and circuits that had not been used for geological ages. Then came a very faint sound, the first that Alvin had ever heard from the machine. It was a tiny humming, which soared swiftly octave by octave until it was lost at the edge of hearing.

There was no sense of change or motion, but suddenly he noticed that the stars were drifting across the screen. The Earth reappeared, and rolled past—then appeared again, in a slightly different position.

The ship was "hunting", swinging in space like a compass needle seeking the north. For minutes the skies turned and twisted around them until at last the ship came to rest, a giant projectile aimed at the stars.

Centered in the screen the great ring of the Seven Suns lay in its rainbow-hued beauty. A little of Earth was still visible as a dark crescent edged with the gold and crimson of the sunset. Something was happening now, Alvin knew, beyond all his experience. He waited, gripping his seat, while the seconds drifted by and the Seven Suns glittered on the screen.

There was no sound, only a sudden wrench that seemed to blur the vision—but Earth vanished as if a giant hand had whipped it away. They were alone in space, alone with the stars and a strangely shrunken sun. Earth was gone as though it had never been.

Again came that wrench and with it now the faintest murmur of sound, as if for the first time the generators were exerting some appreciable fraction of their power. Yet for a moment it seemed that nothing had happened. Then Alvin realized that the sun itself was gone and that the stars were creeping slowly past the ship.

He looked back for an instant and saw—nothing. All the heavens behind had vanished utterly, obliterated by a hemisphere of night. Even as he watched, he could see the stars plunge into it, to disappear like sparks falling upon water. The ship was traveling far faster than light and Alvin knew that the familiar space of Earth and Sun held him no more.

When that sudden, vertiginous wrench came for the third time his heart almost stopped beating. The strange blurring of vision was unmistakable now. For a moment his surroundings seemed distorted out of recognition.

The meaning of that distortion came to him in a flash of insight he could not explain. *It was real, no delusion of his eyes.* Somehow he was catching, as he passed through the thin film of the present, a glimpse of the changes that were occurring in the space around him.

At the same instant the murmur of the generators rose to a roar that shook the ship—a sound doubly impressive for it was the first cry of protest that Alvin had ever heard from a machine. Then it was all over and the sudden silence seemed to ring in his ears. The great generators had done their work. They would not be needed again until the end of the voyage.

The stars ahead flared blue-white and vanished into the ultra-violet. Yet by some magic of science or nature the Seven Suns were still visible, though now their positions and colors were subtly changed. The ship was hurtling towards them along a tunnel of darkness, beyond the boundaries of space and time, at a velocity too enormous for the mind to contemplate.

It was hard to believe that they had now been flung out of the Solar System at a speed which, unless it were checked, would soon take them through the heart of the galaxy and into the greater emptiness beyond. Neither Alvin nor Theon could conceive the real immensity of their journey.

The great sagas of exploration had completely changed Man's outlook towards the universe and even now, millions of centuries later, the ancient traditions had not wholly died. There had once been a ship, legend whispered, that had circumnavigated the Cosmos between the rising and the setting of the sun. The billions of miles between the stars meant nothing before such speeds. To Alvin this voyage was very little greater and perhaps less dangerous than his first journey to Lys.

It was Theon who voiced both their thoughts as the Seven Suns slowly brightened ahead. "Alvin," he remarked, "that formation can't possibly be natural."

The other nodded. "I've thought that for years, but it still seems fantastic."

"The system may not have been built by Man," agreed Theon, "but intelligence must have created it. Nature could never have formed that perfect circle of stars, one for each of the primary colors, all equally brilliant. And there's nothing else in the visible universe like the Central Sun."

"Why should such a thing have been made, then?"

"Oh, I can think of many reasons. Perhaps it's a signal, so that any strange ship entering the Universe will know where to look for life. Perhaps it marks the center of galactic administration. Or perhaps—and somehow I feel that this is the real explanation—it's simply the greatest of all works of art. But it's foolish to speculate now. In a little while we'll know the truth."

CHAPTER XV

Vanamonde

SO THEY waited, lost in their own dreams, while hour by hour the Seven Suns drifted apart until they had filled that strange tunnel of night in which the ship was riding. Then, one by one, the six outer stars vanished at the brink of darkness and at last only the Central Sun was left.

Though it could no longer be fully in their space it still shone with the pearly light that marked it out from all other stars. Minute by minute its brilliance increased until presently it was no longer a point but a tiny disc. And now the disc was beginning to expand before them.

There was the briefest of warnings. For a moment a deep, bell-like note vibrated through the room. Alvin clenched the arms of his chair, though it was a futile enough gesture.

Once again the great generators exploded into life and, with an abruptness that was almost blinding, the stars reappeared. The ship had dropped back into space, back into the universe of suns and planets, the natural world where nothing could move more swiftly than light.

They were already within the system of the Seven Suns, for the great ring of coloured globes now dominated the sky. And what a sky it was! All the stars they had known, all the familiar constellations, had gone. The Milky Way was no longer a faint band of mist far to one side of the heavens. They were now at the center of creation and its great circle divided the universe in twain.

The ship was still moving very swiftly towards the Central Sun and the six remaining stars of the system were colored beacons ranged around the sky. Not far from the nearest of them were the tiny sparks of circling planets, worlds that must have been of enormous size to be visible over such a distance. It was a sight grander than anything nature had ever built and Alvin knew that Theon had been correct. This superb symmetry was a deliberate challenge to the stars scattered aimlessly around it.

The cause of the Central Sun's nacreous light was now clearly visible. The great star, surely one of the most brilliant in the whole universe, was shrouded in an envelope of gas which softened its radiation and gave it its characteristic color. The surrounding nebula could only be seen indirectly and it was twisted into strange shapes that eluded the eye. But it was there and the longer one stared the more extensive it seemed to be.

Alvin wondered where the robot was taking them. Was it following some ancient memory or were there guiding signals in the space around them? He had left their destination entirely to the machine and presently he noticed the pale spark of light towards which they were traveling. It was almost lost in the glare of the Central Sun and, around it, were the yet fainter gleams of other worlds. Their enormous journey was coming to its end.

The planet was now only a few million miles away, a beautiful sphere of multicoloured light. There could be no darkness anywhere upon its surface, for as it turned beneath the Central Sun, the other stars would march one by one across its skies.

Alvin now saw very clearly the meaning of the Master's dying words, "It is lovely to watch the colored shadows on the planets of eternal light."

Now they were so close that they could see continents and oceans and a faint haze of atmosphere. Yet there was something puzzling about its makings, and presently they realized that the divisions between land and water were curiously regular. This planet's continents were not as Nature had left them—but how small a task the shaping of a world must have been to those who built its suns!

"Those aren't oceans at all!" Theon exclaimed suddenly. "Look—you can see markings in them!"

Not until the planet was nearer could Alvin see clearly what his friend meant. Then he noticed faint bands and lines along the continental borders, well inside what he

had taken to be the limits of the sea. The sight filled him with a sudden doubt, for he knew too well the meaning of those lines. He had seen them once before in the desert beyond Diaspar, and they told him that his journey had been in vain.

"This planet is as dry as Earth," he said dully. "It's water has all gone—those markings are the salt-beds where the seas have evaporated."

"They would never have let that happen," replied Theon. "I think that, after all, we are too late."

His disappointment was so bitter that Alvin did not trust himself to speak again but stared silently at the great world ahead. With impressive slowness the planet turned beneath the ship and its surface rose majestically to meet them. Now they could see buildings—minute white incrustations everywhere save on the ocean beds themselves.

ONCE this world had been the center of the Universe. Now it was still, the air was empty and on the ground were none of the scurrying dots that spoke of life. Yet the ship was still sliding purposefully over the frozen sea of stone—a sea which here and there had gathered itself into great waves that challenged the sky.

Presently the ship came to rest, as if the robot had at last traced its memories to their source. Below them was a column of snow-white stone springing from the center of an immense marble amphitheatre. Alvin waited for a little while. Then, as the machine remained motionless, he directed it to land at the foot of the pillar.

Until now, Alvin had half hoped to find life on this planet. That hope vanished instantly as he left the airlock. Never before in his life, even in the desolation of Shalmirane, had he been in utter silence. On Earth there was always the murmur of voices, the stir of living creatures or the sighing of the wind. Here were none of these nor ever would be again.

Why the machine had brought them to this place there was no way of telling, but Alvin knew that the choice made little difference. The great column of white stone was perhaps twenty times the height of a man and was set in a circle of metal slightly raised above the level of the plain. It was featureless and of its purpose there was no hint. They might guess, but they would never know, that it had once marked the zero point of all astronomical measurements.

So this, thought Alvin sadly, was the end of all his searching. He knew that it would be useless to visit the other worlds of the Seven Suns. Even if there were still intelligence in the Universe, where could he seek it now? He had seen the stars scattered like dust across the heavens and he knew that what was left of time was not enough to explore them all.

Suddenly a feeling of loneliness and oppression such as he had never before experienced seemed to overwhelm him. He could understand now the fear of Diaspar for the great spaces of the Universe, the terror that had made his people gather in the little microcosm of their city. It was hard to believe that, after all, they had been right.

He turned to Theon for support. But Theon was standing, hands tightly clenched, with his brow furrowed and a glazed look in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" Alvin asked in alarm.

Theon was still staring into nothingness as he replied.

"There's something coming. I think we'd better go back to the ship."

The Galaxy had turned many times upon its axis since consciousness first came to Vanamonde. He could recall little of those first aeons and the creatures who had tended him then—but he could remember still his desolation when they had gone at last and left him alone among the stars.

Down the ages since he had wandered from sun to sun, slowly evolving and increasing his powers. Once he had dreamed of finding those who had attended his birth and, though the dream had faded now, it had never wholly died.

On countless worlds he had found the wreckage that life had left behind, but intelligence he had discovered only once—and from the Black Sun he had fled in terror. Yet the Universe was very large and the search had scarcely begun.

Far away though it was in space and time, the great burst of power from the heart of the Galaxy beckoned to Vanamonde across the light-years. It was utterly unlike the radiation of the stars and it had appeared in his field of consciousness as suddenly as a meteor trail across a cloudless sky. He moved towards it, to the latest moment of its existence,

sloughing from him in the way he knew the dead unchanging pattern of the past.

He knew this place, for he had been here before. It had been lifeless then, but now it held intelligence. The long metal shape lying upon the plain he could not understand, for it was as strange to him as almost all the physical world.

Around it still clung the aura of power that had drawn him across the universe, but that was of no interest to him now. Carefully, with the delicate nervousness of a wild beast half poised for flight, he reached out towards the two minds he had discovered.

And then he knew that his long search was ended.

CHAPTER XVI

Two Meetings

HOW unthinkable, Rorden thought, this meeting would have seemed only a few days ago. Although he was still technically under a cloud, his presence was so obviously essential that no one had suggested excluding him.

The six visitors sat facing the Council, flanked on either side by the co-opted members such as himself. This meant that he could not see their faces, but the expressions opposite were sufficiently instructive.

There was no doubt that Alvin had been right, and the Council was slowly realizing the unpalatable truth. *The delegates from Lys could think almost twice as quickly as the finest minds in Diaspar.*

Nor was that their only advantage, for they also showed an extraordinary degree of co-ordination which Rorden guessed must be due to their telepathic powers. He wondered if they were reading the Councillors' thoughts, but decided that they would not have broken the solemn assurance without which this meeting would have been impossible.

Rorden did not think that much progress had been made. For that matter he did not see how it could be. Alvin had gone into space and nothing could alter that. The Council, which had not yet fully accepted Lys, still seemed incapable of realizing what had happened.

But it was clearly frightened, and so were most of the visitors. Rorden himself was not as terrified as he had expected. His fears were still there, but he had faced them at last. Something of Alvin's own recklessness—or was it courage—had changed his outlook and given him new horizons.

The President's question caught him unaware but he recovered himself quickly.

"I think," he said, "it's sheer chance that this situation never arose before. There was nothing we could have done to stop it, for events were always ahead of us." Everyone knew that by "events" he meant Alvin, but there were no comments.

"It's futile to bicker about the past. Diaspar and Lys have both made mistakes. When Alvin returns you may prevent him leaving Earth again—if you can. I don't think you will succeed, for he may have learnt a great deal by then. But if what you fear has happened there's nothing any of us can do about it. Earth is helpless—as she has been for millions of centuries."

Rorden paused and glanced along the table. His words had pleased no one nor had he expected them to do so.

"Yet I don't see why we should be so alarmed. Earth is in no greater danger now than she has always been. Why should two boys in a single small ship bring the wrath of the Invaders down upon us again? If we'll be honest with ourselves we must admit that the Invaders could have destroyed our world ages ago."

There was a shocked silence. This was heresy—but Rorden was interested to notice that two of the visitors seemed to approve.

The President interrupted, frowning heavily.

"Is there not a legend that the Invaders spared Earth itself only on condition that Man never went into space again? And have we not now broken those conditions?"

"Once I too believed that," said Rorden. "We accept many things without question and this is one of them. But my machines know nothing of legend, only of truth—and there is no historical record of such an agreement. I am convinced that anything so important would have been permanently recorded as many lesser matters have been."

Alvin, he thought, would have been proud of him now. It was strange that he should be defending the boy's ideas when, if Alvin himself had been present, he might well have been attacking them. One at least

of his dreams had come true. The relationship between Lys and Diaspar was still unstable, but it was a beginning. Where, he wondered, was Alvin now?

Alvin had seen or heard nothing, but he did not stop to argue. Only when the airlock had closed behind them did he turn to his friend.

"What was it?" he asked, a little breathlessly.

"I don't know. It was something terrific. I think it's still watching us."

"Shall we leave?"

"No. I was frightened at first, but I don't think it will harm us. It seems simply—interested."

ALVIN was about to reply when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a sensation unlike any he had ever known before. A warm tingling glow seemed to spread through his body. It lasted only a few seconds, but when it was gone he was no longer Alvin of Loronei.

Something was sharing his brain, overlapping it as one circle may partly cover another. He was conscious, also, of Theon's mind close at hand, equally entangled in whatever creature had descended upon them.

The sensation was strange rather than unpleasant and it gave Alvin his first glimpse of true telepathy—the power which, in his race, had so degenerated that it could now be used only to control machines.

Alvin had rebelled at once when Seranis had tried to dominate his mind, but he did not struggle against this intrusion. It would have been useless, and he knew that this intelligence, whatever it might be, was not unfriendly. He relaxed completely, accepting without resistance the fact that an infinitely greater intelligence than his own was exploring his mind. But in that belief he was not wholly right.

One of these minds, Vanamonde saw at once, was more sympathetic and accessible than the other. He could tell that both were filled with wonder at his presence and that surprised him greatly. It was hard to believe that they could have forgotten—forgetfulness, like mortality, was beyond the comprehension of Vanamonde.

Communication was very difficult: many of the thought-images in their minds were so strange that he could hardly recognize them. He was puzzled and a little frightened by the recurrent fear-pattern of the Invaders. It reminded him of his own emotions when the Black Sun first came into his field of knowledge.

But they knew nothing of the Black Sun and now their own questions were beginning to form in his mind.

"What are you?"

He gave the only reply he could.

"I am Vanamonde."

There came a pause (How long the pattern of their thoughts took to form!) and then the question was repeated. They had not understood. That was strange, for surely their kind had given him his name for it to be among the memories of his birth. Those memories were very few and they began strangely at a single point in time, but they were crystal-clear.

Again their tiny thoughts struggled up into his consciousness.

"Who are the Great Ones—are you one of them yourself?"

He did not know. They could scarcely believe him and their disappointment came sharp and clear across the abyss separating their minds from his. But they were patient and he was glad to help them, for their quest was the same as his and they gave him the first companionship he had ever known.

As long as he lived, Alvin did not believe he would ever again undergo so strange an experience as this soundless conversation. It was hard to believe that he could be so little more than a spectator, for he did not care to admit, even to himself, that Theon's mind was so much more powerful than his own. He could only wait and wonder, half-dazed by the torrent of thoughts just beyond the limits of his understanding.

Presently Theon, rather pale and strained, broke off the contact and turned to his friend.

"Alvin," he said, his voice very tired. "There's something strange here. I don't understand it at all."

The news did a little to restore Alvin's self esteem and his face must have shown his feelings, for Theon gave a sudden, not unsympathetic laugh.

"I can't discover what this—Vanamonde—is," he continued. "It's a creature of tremendous knowledge, but it seems to have very little intelligence. Of course," he added, "its mind may be of such a different order that we can't understand it—yet somehow I don't believe that is the right explanation."

"Well, what *have* you learned?" asked Al-

vin with some impatience. "Does it know anything about this place?"

Theon's mind still seemed very far away.

"This city was built by many races, including our own," he said absently. "It can give me facts like that, but it doesn't seem to understand their meaning. I believe it's conscious of the past, without being able to interpret it. Everything that's ever happened seems jumbled together in its mind."

He paused thoughfully for a moment. Then his face lightened.

"There's only one thing to do. Somehow or other, we must get Vanamonde to Earth so that our philosophers can study him."

"Would that be safe?" asked Alvin.

"Yes," answered Theon, thinking how uncharacteristic his friend's remark was. "Vanamonde is friendly. More than that, in fact—he seems almost affectionate."

And quite suddenly the thought that all the while had been hovering at the edge of Alvin's consciousness came clearly into view. He remembered Krif and all the small animals that were constantly escaping ("It won't happen again, Mother") to annoy Seranis. And he recalled—how long ago that seemed!—the zoological purpose behind their expedition to Shalmirane.

Theon had found a new pet.

CHAPTER XVII

The Black Sun

THEY landed at noon in the glade of Airlee, with no thought of concealment. Alvin wondered if ever in human history any ship had brought such a cargo to Earth—if indeed Vanamonde were located in the physical space of the machine.

There had been no sign of him on the voyage. Theon believed, and his knowledge was more direct, that only Vanamonde's sphere of attention could be said to have any location in space.

As they left the ship the doors closed softly behind them and a sudden wind tugged at their clothes. Then the machine was only a silver dot falling into the sky, returning to the world where it belonged until Alvin should need it again.

Seranis was waiting for them as Theon had known and Alvin had half expected. She looked at the boys in silence for a while, then said quietly to Alvin, "You're making life rather complicated for us, aren't you?"

There was no rancor in the words, only a half-humorous resignation and even a dawning approval.

Alvin sensed her meaning at once.

"Then Vanamonde's arrived?"

"Yes, hours ago. Since dawn we have learned more of history than we knew existed."

Alvin looked at her in amazement. Then he understood. It was not hard to imagine what the impact of Vanamonde must have been upon this people, with their keen perceptions and their wonderfully interlocking minds. They had reacted with surprising speed and he had a sudden incongruous picture of Vanamonde, perhaps a little frightened, surrounded by the eager intellects of Lys.

"Have you discovered what he is?" Alvin asked.

"Yes. That was simple, though we still don't know his origin. He's a pure mentality and his knowledge seems to be unlimited. But he's childish and I mean that quite literally."

"Of course!" cried Theon. "I should have guessed!"

Alvin looked puzzled and Seranis took pity on him.

"I mean that although Vanamonde has a colossal, perhaps an infinite mind, he's immature and undeveloped. His actual intelligence is less than that of a human being—" she smiled a little wryly — "though his thought processes are much faster and he learns very quickly.

"He also has some powers we do not yet understand. The whole of the past seems open to his mind, in a way that's difficult to describe. He must have used that ability to follow your path back to Earth."

Alvin stood in silence, for once somewhat overcome. He realized how right Theon had been to bring Vanamonde to Lys. And he knew how lucky he had been ever to outwit Seranis. That was not something he would do twice in a lifetime.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that Vanamonde has only just been born?"

"By his standards, yes. His actual age is very great, though apparently less than Man's. The extraordinary thing is that he insists that *we* created him, and there's no doubt that his origin is bound up with all the

great mysteries of the past."

"What's happening to Vanamonde now?" asked Theon in a slightly possessive voice.

"The historians of Grevarn are questioning him. They are trying to map out the main outlines of the past, but the work will take years. Vanamonde can describe the past in perfect detail, but as he doesn't understand what he sees it's very difficult to work with him."

Alvin wondered how Seranis knew all this. Then he realized that probably every waking mind in Lys was watching the progress of the great research.

"Rorden should be here," he said, coming to a sudden decision. "I'm going to Diaspar to fetch him."

"*And* Jeserac," he added, in a determined afterthought.

RORDEN had never seen a whirlwind, but if one had hit him the experience would have felt perfectly familiar. There were times when his sense of reality ceased to function and the feeling that everything was a dream became almost overwhelming. This was such a moment now.

He closed his eyes and tried to recall the familiar room in Diaspar which had once been both a part of his personality and a barrier against the outer world. What would he have thought, he wondered, could he have looked into the future when he had first met Alvin and seen the outcome of that encounter? But of one thing he was sure and a little proud—he would not have turned aside.

The boat was moving slowly across the lake with a gentle rocking motion that Rorden found rather pleasant. Why the village of Grevarn had been built on an island he could not imagine. It seemed a most inconvenient arrangement.

It was true that the colored houses, which seemed to float at anchor upon the tiny waves, made a scene of almost unreal beauty. That was all very well, thought Rorden, but one couldn't spend the whole of one's life staring at scenery. Then he remembered that this was precisely what many of these eccentric people did.

Eccentric or not, they had minds he could respect. To him the thoughts of Vanamonde were as meaningless as a thousand voices shouting together in some vast echoing cave. Yet the men of Lys could disentangle them, could record them to be analyzed at leisure. Already the structure of the past, which had once seemed lost forever, was becoming faintly visible. And it was so strange and unexpected that it appeared to bear no resemblance at all to the history that Rorden had always believed.

In a few months he would present his first report to Diaspar. Though its contents were still uncertain, he knew that it would end forever the sterile isolation of his race. The barriers between Lys and Diaspar would vanish when their origin was understood, and the mingling of the two great cultures would invigorate mankind for ages to come.

Yet even this now seemed no more than a minor byproduct of the great research that was just beginning. If what Vanamonde had hinted was indeed true, Man's horizons must soon embrace not merely the Earth, but must enfold the stars and reach out to the galaxies beyond. But of these further vistas it was still too early to be sure.

Calitrax, chief historian of Lys, met them at the little jetty. He was a tall, slightly stooping man and Rorden wondered how, without the help of the Master Associators, he had ever managed to learn so much in his short life. It did not occur to him that the very absence of such machines was the reason for the wonderful memories he had met in Grevarn.

They walked together beside one of the innumerable canals that made life in the village so hazardous to strangers. Calitrax seemed a little preoccupied and Rorden knew that part of his mind was still with Vanamonde.

"Have you settled your date-fixing procedure yet?" asked Rorden presently, feeling somewhat neglected.

Calitrax remembered his duties as host and broke contact with obvious reluctance.

"Yes," he said. "It has to be the astronomical method. We think it's accurate to ten thousand years even back to the Dawn Ages. It could be even better, but that's good enough to mark out the main epochs."

"What about the Invaders? Has Bensor located them?"

"No. He made one attempt, but it's hopeless to look for any isolated period. What we're doing now is to go back to the beginning of history and then take cross sections at regular intervals. We'll link them together by guesswork until we can fill in the details. If only Vanamonde could interpret what he sees! As it is we have to work through masses of irrelevant material."

"I wonder what he thinks about the whole affair. It must all be rather puzzling to him."

"Yes, I suppose it must. But he's very docile and friendly, and I think he's happy if one can use that word. So Theon believes, and they seem to have a curious sort of affinity. Ah, here's Bensor with the latest ten million years of history. I'll leave you in his hands."

THE Council Chamber had altered little since Alvin's last visit, for the seldom-used projection equipment was so inconspicuous that one could easily have overlooked it. There were two empty chairs along the great table. One, he knew, was Jeserac's. But though he was in Lys, Jeserac would be watching this meeting as would almost all the world.

If Rorden recalled their last appearance in this room he did not care to mention it. But the Councillors certainly remembered, as Alvin could tell by the ambiguous glances he received. He wondered what they would be thinking when they had heard Rorden's story. Already, in a few months, the present had changed out of all recognition—and now they were going to lose the Past.

Rorden began to speak. The great ways of Diaspar would be empty of traffic. The city would be hushed as Alvin had known it only once before in his life. It was waiting, waiting for the veil of the past to be lifted again after—if Calitrax was right—more than fifteen hundred million years.

Very briefly Rorden ran through the accepted history of the race—the history that both Diaspar and Lys had always believed beyond question. He spoke of the unknown peoples of the Dawn Civilizations, who had left behind them nothing but a handful of great names and the fading legends of the Empire.

Even at the beginning, so the story went, Man had desired the stars and had at last attained them. For millions of years he had expanded across the galaxy, gathering system after system beneath his sway. Then, out of the darkness beyond the rim of the universe, the Invaders had struck and wrenched from him all that he had won.

The retreat to the Solar System had been bitter and must have lasted many ages. Earth itself was barely saved by the fabulous battles that raged round Shalmirane. When all was over Man was left with only his memories and the world on which he had been born.

Rorden paused. He looked round the great room and smiled slightly as his eyes met Alvin's.

"So much for the tales we have believed since our records began. I must tell you now that they are false—false in every detail—*so false that even now we have not fully reconciled them with the truth.*"

He waited for the full meaning of his words to strike home. Then, speaking slowly and carefully but, after the first few minutes, never consulting his notes, he gave the city the knowledge that had been won from the mind of Vanamonde.

It was not even true that Man had reached the stars. The whole of his little empire was bounded by the orbit of Persephone, for interstellar space proved a barrier beyond his power to cross. His entire civilization was huddled round the sun and was still very young when—the stars reached him.

The impact must have been shattering. Despite his failures Man had never doubted that one day he would conquer the deeps of space. He believed too that, if the universe held his equals, it did not hold his superiors. He knew that both beliefs were wrong and that, out among the stars, were minds far greater than his own.

For many centuries, first in the ships of other races and later in machines built with borrowed knowledge, Man had explored the Galaxy. Everywhere he found cultures he could understand but could not match and, here and there, he encountered minds which would soon have passed altogether beyond his comprehension.

The shock was tremendous, but it proved the making of the race. Sadder and infinitely wiser, Man had returned to the Solar System to brood upon the knowledge he had gained. He would accept the challenge and slowly he evolved a plan which gave hope for the future.

Once the physical sciences had been Man's greatest interest. Now he turned even more fiercely to genetics and the study of the mind. Whatever the cost he would drive himself to the limits of his evolution.

The great experiment had consumed the entire energies of the race for millions of years. All that striving, all that sacrifice and toil, became only a handful of words in Rorden's narrative. It had brought Man his greatest victories. He had banished dis-

ease. He could live for ever if he wished and, in mastering telepathy, he had bent the most subtle of all powers to his will.

HE WAS ready to go out again, relying upon his own resources, into the great spaces of the galaxy. He would meet as an equal the races of the worlds from which he had once turned aside. And he would play his full part in the story of the universe.

These things he did. From this age, perhaps the most spacious in all history, came the legends of the Empire. It had been an Empire of many races, but this had been forgotten in the drama, too tremendous for tragedy, in which it had come to its end.

The Empire had lasted for at least a billion years. It must have known many crises, perhaps even wars, but all these were lost in the sweep of great races moving together towards maturity.

"We can be proud," continued Rorden, "of the part our ancestors played in this story. Even when they had reached their cultural plateau they lost none of their initiative. We deal now with conjecture rather than proven fact, but it seems certain that the experiments which were at once the Empire's downfall and its crowning glory were inspired and directed by Man.

"The philosophy underlying these experiments appears to have been this—contact with other species had shown Man how profoundly a race's world-picture depended upon its physical body and the sense organs with which it was equipped.

It was argued that a true picture of the Universe could be attained, if at all, only by a mind which was free from such physical limitations—a pure mentality, in fact. This idea was common among most very ancient religions and was believed by many to be the goal of evolution.

"Largely as a result of the experience gained in his own regeneration, Man suggested that the creation of such beings should be attempted. It was the greatest challenge ever thrown out to intelligence in the universe and, after centuries of debate, it was accepted. All the races of the galaxy joined together in its fulfilment.

"Half a billion years were to separate the dream from the reality. Civilizations were to rise and fall, again and yet again the age-long toil of worlds was to be lost, but the goal was never forgotten. One day we may know the full story of this, the greatest sustained effort in all history. Today we only know that its ending was a disaster that almost wrecked the galaxy.

"Into this period Vanamonde's mind refuses to go. There is a narrow region of time which is blocked to him—but only, we believe, by his own fears. At the beginning we can see the Empire at the summit of its glory, taut with the expectation of coming success.

"At its end, only a few thousand years later, the Empire is shattered and the stars themselves are dimmed as though drained of their power. Over the Galaxy hangs a pall of fear, a fear with which is linked the name—"The Mad Mind".

"What must have happened in that short period is not hard to guess. The pure mentality had been created, but it was either insane or, as seems more likely from other sources, was implacably hostile to matter. For centuries it ravaged the Universe until brought under control by forces of which we cannot guess.

"Whatever weapon the Empire used in its extremity squandered the resources of the stars. From the memories of that conflict spring some, though not all, of the legends of the Invaders. But of this I shall presently say more.

"The Mad Mind could not be destroyed, for it was immortal. It was driven to the edge of the galaxy and there imprisoned in a way we do not understand. Its prison was a strange artificial star known as the Black Sun and there it remains to this day. When the Black Sun dies it will be free again. How far in the future that day lies there is no way of telling."

CHAPTER XVIII

Renaissance

ALVIN glanced quickly around the great room, which had become utterly silent. The Councillors, for the most part, sat rigid in their seats, staring at Rorden with a trancelike immobility. Even to Alvin, who had heard the story in fragments, Rorden's narrative still had the excitement of a newly unfolding drama. To the Councillors the impact of his revelations must be overwhelming.

Rorden was speaking again in a quiet,

more subdued voice, as he described the last days of the Empire. This was the age, Alvin had decided, in which he would have liked to live. There had been adventure then and a superb and dauntless courage—the courage that could snatch victory from the teeth of disaster.

"Though the Galaxy had been laid waste by the Mad Mind the resources of the Empire were still enormous and its spirit was unbroken. With a courage at which we can only marvel the great experiment was resumed and a search made for the flaw that had caused the catastrophe.

"There were now, of course, many who opposed the work and predicted further disasters, but they were overruled. The project went ahead and, with the knowledge so bitterly gained, this time it succeeded.

"The new race that was born had a potential intellect that could not even be measured. But it was completely infantile. We do not know if this was expected by its creators, but it seems certain that they knew it would be inevitable.

"Millions of years would be needed before it reached maturity and nothing could be done to hasten the process. Vanamonde was the first of these minds. There must be others elsewhere in the Galaxy, but we believe that only a very few were created, for Vannamonde has never encountered any of his fellows.

"The creation of the pure mentalities was the greatest achievement of Galactic civilization. In it Man played a major and perhaps a dominant part. I have made no reference to Earth itself, for its story is too small a thread to be traced in the great tapestry.

"Since it had always been drained of its most adventurous spirits our planet had inevitably become somewhat conservative and, in the end, it opposed the scientists who created Vanamonde. Certainly it played no part at all in the final act.

"The work of the Empire was now finished. The men of that age looked round at the stars they had ravaged in their desperate peril and they made the decision that might have been expected. They would leave the Universe to Vanamonde.

"The choice was not hard to make, for the Empire had now made the first contacts with a very great and very strange civilization far around the curve of the cosmos. This civilization, if the hints we can gather are correct, had evolved on the physical plane further than had been believed possible. There were, it seemed, more solutions than one to the problem of ultimate intelligence.

"But this we can only guess. All we know for certain is that, within a very short period of time, our ancestors and their fellow races have gone upon a journey which we cannot follow. Vanamonde's thoughts seem bounded by the confines of the galaxy, but through his mind we have watched the beginning of that great adventure."

A pale wraith of its former glory, the slowly turning wheel of the galaxy hangs in nothingness. Throughout its length are the great empty rents which the Mad Mind has torn—wounds that in ages to come the drifting stars will fill. But they will never restore the splendor that has gone.

Man is about to leave his universe, as once he left his world. And not only Man, but the thousand other races that have worked with him to make the Empire. They have gathered together, here at the edge of the galaxy, with its whole thickness between them and the goal they will not reach for ages.

The long line of fire strikes across the Universe, leaping from star to star. In a moment of time a thousand suns have died, feeding their energies to the dim and monstrous shape that has torn along the axis of the Galaxy and is now receding into the abyss.

"The Empire had now left the universe to meet its destiny elsewhere. When its heirs, the pure mentalities, have reached their full stature we believe it will return again. But that day must still lie far ahead.

"This, in its outlines, is the story of galactic civilization. Our own history, which we thought so important, is no more than a belated episode which we have not yet examined in detail. But it seems that many of the older, less adventurous races refused to leave their homes. Our direct ancestors were among them.

"Most of these races fell into decadence and are now extinct. Our own world barely escaped the same fate. In the Transition centuries—which really lasted for millions of years—the knowledge of the past was lost or else deliberately destroyed. The latter seems more probable.

"We believe that Man sank into a super-

stitious barbarism during which he distorted history to remove his sense of impotence and failure. The legend of the Invaders is certainly false and the Battle of Shalmirane is a myth. True, Shalmirane exists, and was one of the greatest weapons ever forged—but it was used against no intelligent enemy.

"Once the Earth had a single giant satellite, the Moon. When it began to fall, Shalmirane was built to destroy it. Around that destruction have been weaved the legends you all know, and there are many such."

RORDEN paused and smiled a little ruefully.

"There are other paradoxes that have not yet been resolved, but the problem is one for the psychologist rather than the historian. Even my records cannot wholly be trusted, and bear clear evidence of tampering in the very remote past.

"Only Diaspar and Lys survived the period of decadence—Diaspar thanks to the perfection of its machines, Lys owing to its partial isolation and the unusual intellectual powers of its people. But both cultures, even when they had struggled back to their former level, were distorted by the fears and myths they had inherited.

"Those fears need haunt us no longer. All down the ages, we have now discovered, there were men who rebelled against them and maintained a tenuous link between Diaspar and Lys. Now the last barriers can be swept aside and our two races can move together into the future—whatever it may bring."

"I wonder what Yarlan Zey would think of this?" said Rorden thoughtfully. "I doubt if he would approve."

The Park had changed considerably, so far very much for the worse. But when the rubble had been cleared away the road to Lys would be open for all to follow.

"I don't know," Alvin replied. "Though he closed the Moving Ways, he didn't destroy them as he might very well have done. One day we must discover the whole story behind the Park—and behind Alaine of Lyndar."

"I'm afraid these things will have to wait," said Rorden, "until more important problems have been settled. In any case I can picture Alaine's mind rather well. Once we must have had a good deal in common."

They walked in silence for a few hundred yards, following the edge of the great excavation. The Tomb of Yarlan Zey was now poised in the brink of a chasm, at the bottom of which scores of robots were working furiously.

"By the way," said Alvin abruptly, "did you know that Jeserac is staying in Lys? Jeserac, of all people! He likes it there and won't come back. Of course that will leave a vacancy on the Council."

"So it will," replied Rorden as if he had never given the matter any thought. A short time ago he could have imagined very few things more unlikely than a seat on the Council. Now it was probably only a matter of time.

There would, he reflected, be a good many other resignations in the near future. Several of the older Councillors had found themselves unable to face the new problems pouring upon them.

They were now moving up the slope to the Tomb, through the long avenue of eternal trees. At its end the avenue was blocked by Alvin's ship, which looked strangely out of place in these familiar surroundings.

"There," said Rorden suddenly, "is the greatest mystery of all. *Who was the Master?* Where did he get this ship and the three robots?"

"I've been thinking about that," answered Theon. "We know that he came from the Seven Suns and there might have been a fairly high culture there when civilization on Earth was at its lowest. The ship itself is obviously the work of the Empire.

"I believe that the Master was escaping from his own people. Perhaps he had ideas with which they didn't agree. He was a philosopher, and a rather remarkable one. He found our ancestors friendly but superstitious and tried to educate them, but they misunderstood and distorted his teachings.

"The Great Ones were no more than the men of the Empire—only it wasn't Earth they had left, but the Universe itself. The Master's disciples didn't understand or didn't believe this and all their mythology and ritual was founded on that false premise. One day I intend to go into the Master's history and find why he tried to conceal his past. I think it will be a very interesting story."

"We've a good deal to thank him for," said Rorden as they entered the ship. "Without him we would never have learned the truth about the past."

"I'm not so sure," said Alvin. "Sooner or

later Vanamonde would have discovered us. And I believe there may be other ships hidden on Earth. One day I mean to find them."

THE city was now too distant to be recognized as the work of man and the curve of the planet was becoming visible. In a little while they could see the line of twilight, thousands of miles away on its never-ending march across the desert. Above and around were the stars, still brilliant for all the glory they had lost.

For a long time Rorden stared at the desolate panorama he had never seen before. He felt a sudden contemptuous anger for the men of the past, who had let Earth's beauty die through their own neglect. If one of Alvin's dreams came true and the great transmutation plants still existed, it would not be many centuries before the oceans rolled again.

There was so much to do in the years ahead. Rorden knew that he stood between two ages. Around him he could feel the pulse of mankind beginning to quicken again. There were great problems to be faced and Diaspar would face them. The recharting of the past would take centuries, but when it was finished Man would have recovered all that he had lost. And always now, in the background, would be the great enigma of Vanamonde.

If Calitrax were right Vanamonde had already evolved more swiftly than his creators had expected and the philosophers of Lys had great hopes of future co-operation which they would confide to no one. They had become very attached to the childlike supermind and perhaps they believed that they could foreshorten the aeons which his natural evolution would require.

But Rorden knew that the ultimate destiny of Vanamonde was something in which Man would play no part. He had dreamed, and he believed the dream was true, that at the end of the universe Vanamonde and the Mad Mind must meet each other among the corpses of the stars.

Alvin broke into his reverie and Rorden turned from the screen.

"I wanted you to see this," said Alvin quietly. "It may be many centuries before you have another chance."

"You're not leaving Earth?"

"No. Even if there are other civilizations in this Galaxy, I doubt if they'd be worth the trouble of finding. And there is so much to do here."

Alvin looked down at the great deserts, but his eyes saw instead the waters that would be sweeping over them a thousand years from now. Man had rediscovered his world and he would make it beautiful while he remained upon it. And after that . . .

"I am going to send this ship out of the Galaxy, to follow the Empire wherever it has gone. The search may take ages, but the robot will never tire. One day our cousins will receive my message and they'll know that we are waiting for them here on Earth. They will return and I hope by then we'll be worthy of them, however great they have become."

Alvin fell silent, staring into the future he had shaped but which he might never see. While Man was rebuilding his world this ship would be crossing the darkness between the galaxies and, in thousands of years to come, it would return. Perhaps he would be there to meet it, but if not, he was well content.

They were now above the Pole and the planet beneath them was an almost perfect hemisphere. Looking down upon the belt of twilight Alvin realized that he was seeing at one instant both sunrise and sunset on opposite sides of the world. The symbolism was so perfect and so striking that he was to remember this moment all his life.

In this universe the night was falling: the shadows were lengthening towards an east that would not know another dawn. But elsewhere the stars were still young and the light of morning lingered—and along the path he once had followed Man would one day go again.

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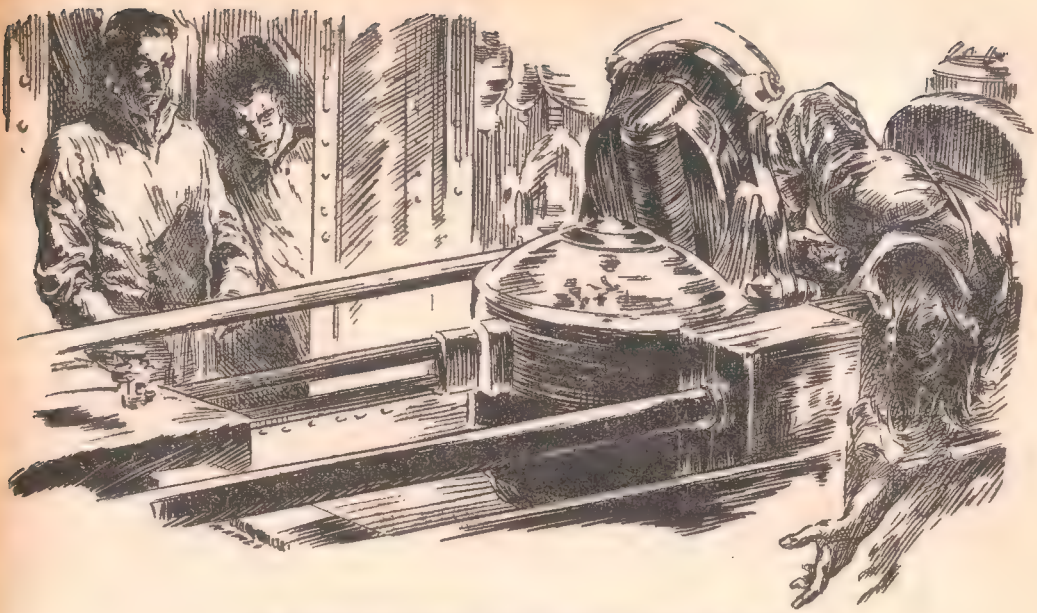
FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE TIME AXIS

An Amazing Complete Novel

By HENRY KUTTNER



Jim Anderson was slumped down in front of the control panel

The Stubborn Men

"Someday we may know the answer. . . ."

THE SOUND was like small glass bells ringing, a thin clear chiming that pulsed with a deep, compelling rhythm, elfin music from fairyland. Contrasting with this dainty chiming, the radiation counter on the wall suddenly began to bark like some ugly but faithful watchdog smelling danger in the night. Jack Danby came to his feet and looked at me, the healthy brown of his face fleeing under a creeping tide of white.

Then he seemed to grasp what was happening. "He lied to me!" he burst out. "This proves it. Gave the staff the night off. Had me ask you down to keep *me* busy and out of the way. What a man!"

Clean and clear and dainty, the elfin music pulsed with a deep vitality. High notes, clear notes, like the sky is high and clear on October nights. On the wall the watchdog hooted now in crazy fear.

Jack Danby went out of the barracks building on the run, heading for the squat structure with the three-foot thick concrete walls, the radiation laboratory. The strange music was coming from the lab and I wondered, as I followed Jack, how the sounds—if they *were* sounds—were getting through those concrete walls.

The door was lead-lined steel. Jack grabbed the latch. The door was locked. He jerked at it.

"Jim!" he screamed. "Open this door."

The elfin notes, as if in answer, swept up in a ringing flood. The laboratory seemed to vibrate with the sound. It appeared to come from the earth below us, from the stars overhead, from the depths of space between those stars. In the fractional part of a second, it seemed to sweep through the whole of space like lightning flashing from a far-off

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

star, then died as the lightning dies, so swiftly you can hardly realize it has come and gone.

Jack seemed to hold his breath. Inside the door, a lock clicked softly, and the steel barrier swung open. But no one looked out at us.

"Dead man's control," Jack Danby whispered. "No, Steve, don't follow me." He went in and I followed him.

Jim Anderson was slumped down in front of the control panel. As he fell, his foot had slipped from the floor switch. That had actuated the circuit that shoved in the baffle plates, stopped the pile, and opened the door.

It was the first time I had seen a man who had just died. There was pain on Jim Anderson's face, and peace too, as if at the last moment he had learned a secret that made the pain unimportant.

Jack swore luridly. "We were scheduled to run this test Monday."

"And you would have been here Monday, in the lab?" I asked.

"Of course." The tone of his voice said this was a silly question. "The whole staff would have been here."

I DIDN'T ask what had killed Jim Anderson because I knew. A sudden and unexpected flood of radiation. Not gamma, though that is deadly enough, but some other unknown kind that exploded in singing music, and killed instantly. This was an atomic research laboratory. Here stubborn men worked with the atom, trying to learn more of its secrets than Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, and Bikini have revealed.

Looking at the man on the floor, Jack choked, and swallowed. I knew the depth of the respect and affection he had held for Jim Anderson. He turned it out of his mind.

"Something here we don't know about," he said. "Some new particle, some new radiation. Have to check."

"Jack!" My voice must have been raw along his nerves.

He put his arm around my shoulder. "Steve, will you call Dr. Carson? He'll want to check this too. Here, I'll go with you."

Because the bulked equipment might still be "hot"—might be emitting lethal quantities of invisible radiation—he shooed me out, brothering me to safety. That's what he was—my brother. Hours later, when I got a chance to talk to him alone, I reminded him of it.

"Danby, you don't have to be the one who runs that check!"

"You don't understand," he answered. "Research, Incorporated has poured millions of dollars into our work."

"Research has all the money it needs. If it wants more, all it has to do is ask somebody, anybody. I am not aware that the Danbys have any more lives than the Andersons."

He sighed. "We need to know, Steve." He gestured toward the northern sky. "When it comes we got to know."

He was talking about an atom bomb.

"But *you* don't have to run that check. Let somebody else do it."

"I'm chief now, Steve," he said. Then he grinned. "Don't worry so much about it. When I'm in the lab, I know I'm working with something a lot more dangerous than a thousand rattlesnakes. You can be certain I'll be careful."

"Then," I said. "You won't mind if I'm here."

His eyes went into wary alertness. "There's no need, Steve. But—" His shrug was elaborate. "I'll write or call you and have you come down for it."

"And if you should forget to write or call?"

"Me?" He laughed. "I won't forget."

"Promise?"

Irritation crept into his voice. "Okay, it's a promise."

With his promise, I agreed to go back to school. I was in college, finishing a master's degree.

A week later, he wrote me, saying that a physicist named Hughes had been promoted to his old job of assistant, that it would be several months before they were ready to run another test, and that he was having trouble replacing staff men who had resigned.

The letter announcing the test came in April. Would I take the night train on Friday? The test would be run Saturday morning.

Hughes met me at the station. He was a big man with gray eyes and a ready grin. He said he was glad to meet me.

"Where's Jack?" I inquired.

"At the lab, checking the connections. He asked me to pick you up."

As he stopped the car in the laboratory

parking lot, I heard the small glass bells ringing.

"What's that?" Hughes said.

"The sneaking, dirty liar!" I burst out, and leaped from the car.

In the soft April night the concrete lab was a monster rooted deep in the earth. From it came high notes, clear notes, like the sky is high and clear, like atoms ringing tiny glass bells as they fled through a crystal lattice. The elfin music burst in a flood, and stopped, and I knew the dead man's switch had gone into operation.

I carried Jack Danby from the concrete lab to the barracks building where he had lived. Later, Hughes came in, gulping, trying to say something when he knew there was nothing that could be said.

"Can't understand it," Hughes said. "Thought we had screened those radiations."

"Where's the staff?" I said.

HE LOOKED surprised. "Jack gave them the night off, to celebrate."

"And he sent you to meet me?"

"Yes. Uh. You think he was trying to protect me?"

"Start checking the shielding," I said.

He looked relieved. "Well, that's what I thought *ought* to be done. Here's a letter I found in the lab. For you." He went out. The note said:

Steve:—

I'm writing this before I run the test check, and if you get to read it, you will know that I was wrong. I want you to promise me something—that you will never do atomic research. There are plenty of other people who can and will do it.

Jack, I thought, do you remember when I used these same arguments on you? Do you remember when I begged you to let somebody else do it? The note continued:

The life of one member of a family is enough, Steve. So promise me you will stay away from the atom.

"Jack," I whispered. "I can promise to stay away from the atom but how can I make it promise to stay away from me?"

Somehow I went back and finished school. Then I went looking for a job. At Research, Inc., they admitted they needed men for a certain project but I was just a kid out of college. The man who interviewed me was quite scornful, and tough. Then I told him who I was.

"Danby? Oh." He looked me over for a long time, repeating "Danby!" half aloud. The way he said it, it sounded like a prayer. "Our Danby who—"

It's October now, with clear bright nights so peaceful and so quiet you'd think they would remain this way forever. Only you know they won't. Nightly as I go from the concrete lab to the barracks used for living quarters, I look up at the night sky, wondering when it will come. Maybe it won't come. That's a hope. And a prayer.

We think we've found a way to test the pile now, by putting the operator in a shielded remote control lab located a mile away.

Hughes thinks a mile is safe, but he doesn't know. Nobody knows.

Some day Hughes will find out. Then, if he fails, it will be my turn. I'm stubborn too.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE MARTIAN GESTURE

A Hall of Fame Novelet by ALEXANDER M. PHILLIPS

HUMPTY DUMPTY had

When Kenneth Wayne, Ruth Stevens and Dr. Bryce are thrust into Mother Goose land by the strange Orban boy, they discover that it's no place for kiddies!

KENNETH Wayne was dressing for dinner when he heard the tapping. It was loud, insistent and seemed to be saying: "No use pretending you're not at home, old man! I can hear you moving around in there!"

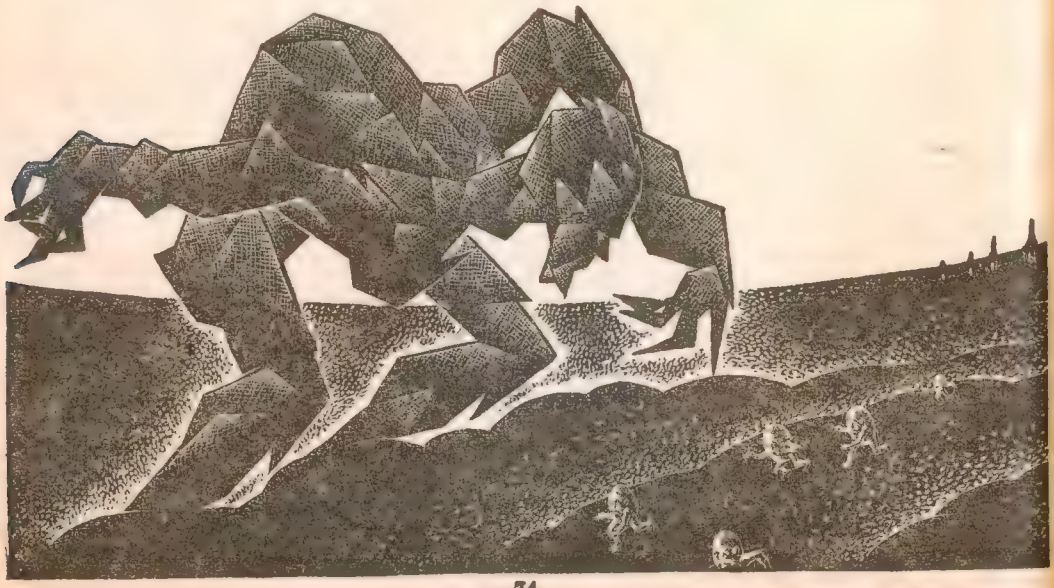
Wayne groaned. He had no desire to discuss vasomotor psychology with young Graham or polytonal music with the long-haired Dr. Reydel. He was dining out with a charming girl, and he wanted to stay alive, vital, every nerve alert to her beauty.

Wayne was one of those imaginative young men who attract ideas to themselves in the fashion of a baby specialist. Instead of babies, people brought him their budding ideas to admire.

Wayne told himself that he was a fool to be annoyed. The mere sight of his tux draped across a chair should discourage a talkative visitor. With an angry shrug he turned and crossed the room in three long strides. He threw the door wide.

The boy who stood in the doorway was a stranger to him. Boy? Well, it was hard not to think of the youngster as a man, for he was heavily bearded and he carried himself with an air of maturity. But Wayne could see that he wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen years old. His clear blue eyes held the tortured look of the very young, and there was a newness about him which contrasted sharply with Wayne's aspect of world weariness and cynicism. Wayne was only twenty-seven, but his age rested heavily upon him. His eyes were shadowed and the planes of his face craggy with thought.

"I'm Phillip Orban," the boy said. "I ran



a great fall

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

away. They were torturing me with their questions."

The Orban boy! Wayne shut his eyes while the universe reeled. Young Orban was carrying an enormous, glowing loop of hollow metal. Before Wayne could cry out in protest the trembling lad stepped into the room and set the loop down on the floor.

"Shut the door," Orban pleaded. "Lock it tight! If they try to get in, tell them I'm not in this room."

Mechanically Wayne locked the door. When he turned, his lips were white.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded. "Do you realize I never saw you before in my life?"

The Orban boy nodded.

"I hid in a cellar under an empty house. But I was cold and hungry. I had to come out. A policeman saw me and I had to run for it. I never saw you before, but I like you. You will tell them I'm not here?"

WAYNE made a despairing gesture. "All right!" he cried. "Did I say I wouldn't? Just take it easy now. Relax!"

It seemed to Wayne that standing before him was an impossible little gnome with a conical cap on his head, made visible by a dimensional vortex that was about to dissolve in a blaze of light.

That was absurd, of course! The Orban boy wasn't one of those mutant supermen freaks science fiction writers were always speculating about. He was a quite normal youngster who had been trapped from infancy in the mind-numbing blackness of space.

But what would be the penalty for sheltering a boy with a price on his head, a boy about whom five million words had been written? Young Orban had committed a serious crime. An ugly crime! To get rid of a man by making him disappear was not a whit less ugly than cold-blooded murder!

Wayne stared down at the shining loop of metal, his eyes wide and incredulous. "Is that the machine you built?" he demanded, and was astonished that he could speak at all.

"It's the *door* I built!" Orban said. "I didn't push Dr. Bryce into it. He stumbled and fell."

"But how did you build it?" Wayne prodded. "You never saw a tool."

"There were tools in my father's workshop," Orban said, quickly. "I knew how to build it. Dr. Bryce isn't dead. He's alive in the blue world."

Structurally the machine was an incredibly simple thing. It consisted of a single loop of hollow metal, twisted into a perfect arch like a gigantic croquet wicket. It was easy to see that the loop was hollow, for it was riddled with holes and an eerie radiance was spilling out of it.

"You've got to help me hide it," Orban pleaded. "If I don't get Dr. Bryce out the blue, bowmen will kill him!"

Wayne turned and gripped the lad's shoulder. "You said you were hungry. Perhaps we can do something about that."

"I am hungry," the lad admitted. "But there's food in the blue world."

Wayne thought that over for a minute; then found himself propelling his guest toward the kitchen.

He left him devouring a glass of milk. No, you didn't devour milk. But the Orban boy was dipping crackers in the milk and eating the crackers. It amounted to the same thing.

Wayne felt that he needed the support of cold print. Actual confirmation of the Orban story in black type. He found the clipping by turning out all the drawers of his desk and then looking under the blotter. It was crumpled and stained, as though someone had wept bitter tears over it. It read:

THE ORBAN STORY
By Ruth Stevens

An infant rocked from birth in a cradle two hundred feet long! A little boy lost in a high-test rocket-ship, seesawing through space! Around and around he whirled, obeying instructions from the age of eight, eating just enough to keep the spark of life from going out.

No disease germs bothered him out there in space! There was no measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, just instructions in his head and—a long forgetting!

What did he think about all those years? What did he dream about?

Phillip Orban was born on that ship. His father invented the Orban drive and built the first rocket ship with an outer hull of sufficient hardness to withstand the stresses of a billion-mile journey through space.

But the power drive gave out and the ship never completed its journey. It went into a circular orbit in the Asteroid Belt and for seventeen years it drifted through space.

The boy's mother died when he was three, mercifully from a heart attack. The boy's father kept a log. We know that he climbed out on the naked hull when the boy was eight, to tighten a loosened gravity plate. A minor repair job—but he put off coming back. Put it off forever!

The boy remembered to remember. Food concentrates should be taken sparingly, twice a day. "You're seven now, son! No—eight tomorrow! Old enough to look after yourself!"

He hadn't one bitter-sweet, earthy memory to cling to. He'd never played pranks on other kids, or dressed up on Hallow'een, or gone fishing in a creek. He'd never watched the dawn redden a haystack or the moon silver the sea.

There were books on that ship An odd assortment of books. The Old English Nursery Rhymes, Mother Goose, the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll. And "How to Build It" books. How to build it if you were Michael Faraday, or Edison or Steinmetz or Nullson. But Phillip Orban read every book on that ship. The psychologists who are in charge of him now won't tell us why they're so excited about his marginal notes.

They found the ship and Orban at last, sank magnetic grappling irons in the hull and towed it back to earth. They returned Orban to his home in North Dakota, the family home, within a dozen

yards of his father's dust-choked workshop.

A boy of seventeen, watched night and day by three trained psychologists. A robust boy, physically almost a man, would have to be terribly warped not to resent that! They're studying him like a guinea pig in a cage. And here's one unladylike journalist who raises her voice in protest! If the Orban boy—

WAYNE shuddered, folded the clipping and crammed it in his vest pocket.

Kenneth Wayne began remembering things: About a machine in an open field, spilling an eerie radiance! And Dr. Bryce struggling with the Orban boy in front of the machine, and plunging backwards into the light. What shocking, incredible event had taken the famed psychologist from the sunlight before he could regain his balance?

Wayne also remembered that the Orban boy had fled, taking the machine with him! A hue and cry had been raised in the nation's press. A shrill screaming, journalism raised to high C. Had Orban deliberately pushed Dr. Bryce into the machine?

If an individual were the sum total of his experiences from birth would not the whole outlook of Orban depart from the human norm! It was a terrifying thought! Was Orban a malicious monster with an inhuman capacity for deceit? Was he—

Twang!

Wayne wheeled with a gasp of horror.

A barbed and deadly looking arrow was quivering in the wall directly opposite the machine! It was an arrow two feet in length—fitted with metallic feathers to give it steadiness of flight, and tipped with a point of jeweled brightness, visible through the translucent plastic of the wall.

Stark terror twisted Wayne's features into a glazed, unnatural mask. That the arrow had come out of the machine he could not doubt. It was directly in line with the "croquet wicket" and there was a spattering of blood on the still quivering shaft.

There was blood on the wall too! Yet Wayne was quite sure that the arrow hadn't grazed his flesh. Automatically he raised one hand to his cheek, and then stared at his palm. His hand gleamed whitely in the cold light. That dripping redness had come out of the machine along with the arrow! The arrow had missed him completely.

Whom had it wounded?

Wayne was swaying in sick horror when a knock sounded on the door and a familiar voice said:

"Ken! For heaven's sake, why did you lock the door?"

Wayne turned, unlocked the door and threw it open, his face white.

The girl who came into the room was vividly alive. Coppery hair she had, cut in a bang, and her lips were slightly parted, her cheeks flushed. She was plainly out of breath and a little angry to be barred by a locked door, after climbing two flights of stairs.

Ruth Stevens did not look like a newspaperwoman. She was striking in a challenging, vibrant way—the kind of girl who could change a man's center of gravity with a look, a quick smile.

She wasn't smiling now. Her eyes darted to the machine and then to the arrow.

"The Orban boy," Wayne said. His voice was thick and it trembled a little, as though he were just about to lose control of it. "He's here. You wrote an article about him, remember? Would you like to meet him?"

Ruth swayed.

Wayne thought perhaps she was going to faint. It was a crazy thing to do, but he leaped toward her without realizing that he was standing a yard from the machine.

As he caught her in his arms something caught him. It was like a fierce rush of wind. It was cyclonic. It whirled him around and started pulling him backwards, straight toward the machine. He held on to the girl without realizing that he was pulling her inexorably in the same direction.

Ruth screamed.

The room seemed to pinwheel. It was much easier for Wayne not to let go of the girl. He did not realize that she was in deadly danger. He thought only of protecting her. There was a howling in the room as light blazed out from the croquet wicket to envelop them.

Far off as though in an inverted lens Wayne saw the Orban boy rushing out of the kitchen, his bearded face twitching in terror. Then everything in the room seemed to whip away into emptiness. . . .

STABILITY came back in slow stages. Wayne was aware first of warmth in his arms, a cry quavering from human lips. Then of a firm surface taking shape beneath him.

He was sitting on the ground holding Ruth in his arms. She was struggling to free herself, one hand pushing against his chin, her

face a blob of whiteness.

He was sitting with his back against a firm stone surface, staring down at her. He could see her face clearly now, distinct and white in a blue glimmering light.

"Ken, where are we?" she choked.

It wasn't an easy question to answer. It was a world of rugged contours. They seemed to be resting on a plain that sloped away into glowing blue mist. There was a curious, dynamic quality about the landscape. Its very emptiness thrust itself on Wayne like chords of music struck wildly on a piano.

Certainly he was resting with his back against a wall of some sort, rising sheer behind him. When he turned his head he could see the wall clearly.

With a little groan Ruth disentangled herself and slipped to the ground at his side, making it easier for him to take note of his surroundings.

There wasn't very much to take note of. Just the wall and the bleak, desolate landscape. A few pebbles were scattered about, and—something small and globular and blubbery that was stirring in a cuplike hollow directly in front of Wayne.

Ruth cried out suddenly and plucked at his sleeve.

"Ken, look! That little egg thing is alive!"

An egg thing! Of course. It did resemble an egg. It was veined and oddly cracked and something wet was spilling out of it. Something projected from it too—the long shaft of an arrow.

Wayne's neck hairs rose. He got up and staggered toward the "egg" and as he did so the whole surface of the wall swept into view. It bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Great Wall of China reduced to fairy tale dimensions.

Rugged and battlemented it was, but small—not more than thirty feet in height at the tower sections and much lower in between. It curved in and out over the plain, under a sky of fiery blueness, to lose itself at the horizon's rim with a kind of downsweeping rush that conveyed an illusion of motion.

The egg-shaped object had stopped moving when Wayne dropped to one knee beside it. The arrow had pierced it cruelly and Wayne could not doubt that it had ceased to feel pain. The little white tadpole arms which sprouted from it were limp now, completely inert in the blue glare. Equally limp was its puckered, little old man face, the mouth hanging open, the heavily lidded eyes drained of all expression.

Wayne did not attempt to withdraw the arrow. Obviously the egg thing was dead. He was glad that it could not return his stare. He arose and turned to Ruth.

"It was alive!" he said. "A ghastly little animal with an almost human face, shaped like an egg. I can't believe—"

Twang!

As the arrow sped past Wayne he leaped back with a startled cry. Something huge and blue had come out from behind a bend in the wall to aim a bow at him. He caught a brief terrifying glimpse of it as it darted back into shadows.

Wayne turned abruptly, and gripped his companion's arm.

"We've got to get away from here as quickly as possible!" he whispered, with hoarse urgency.

"Away?" Ruth stared. "How can we? The machine has disappeared."

"We must get away from this wall. There's something deadly here that shoots to kill!"

"Human beings?"

"Manshaped beings. Angular, flattish. They don't seem to have any heads."

Ruth swayed toward him. "Are you sure they're shooting at us?"

"We can't wait to find out. We've got to run for it."

"Where do you think we are?" Ruth breathed in sick horror. "Another dimension?"

Before Wayne could reply another arrow sped past them with a vibrant twang.

They broke into a run, keeping close to the wall, their shadows preceding them in the blue glimmering. Panting, terrified, they came to a brief halt beneath a darkly looming tower that seemed to bulge out over the plain.

At right angles to the wall, a hundred feet from where they were standing, a vast circular mound bisected the plain, its edges misty in the strange light.

"Come on!" Wayne urged. "That mound may be hollow. We've got to chance it."

They were in motion again, racing toward the mound, when they heard a fluttering sound. It seemed to beat out from the mound in tangible waves, like the stirring of migratory birds gathering in great numbers in a tree and shaking the air with their flutterings.

Then up from the mound twenty or thirty winged black shapes soared, spiraling up into

the sky in a wild, soaring ecstasy of flight. Almost instantly the arrows started flying.

One by one the birds dropped like dead sticks to the ground, amidst a flurry of deadly arrows. With hoarse cawings they dropped, their feathers flying, their long, lizardlike bodies pierced by the cruel shafts.

Back into the mound they dropped, straight down with their flutterings stilled.

For a moment there was complete stillness on the plain, unearthly, terrifying.

Then Wayne said in a choked voice: "Does all this remind you of something? In a vague, distorted, nightmarish way, I mean? Does it?"

RUTH stared across the plain before replying. It seemed to her that she saw shadows, angular, menacing, moving in the distance, on the rim of her vision. It seemed to her that she saw the shadows of bows, blue on the blue plain. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall!" she said. "Six and twenty blackbirds—baked into a pie!"

"You thought of that too, did you?" Wayne's lips were white. "We didn't see Humpty Dumpty fall, but it was a great fall he had. It smashed him, and not all the King's horses and all the King's men—"

"Stop it!" Ruth's voice was almost a scream. "There are no horses, no King's men here. That egg was a hideous little animal with the face of an ape. And blackbirds don't have lizardlike bodies."

A procession came around the mound with a far off beating of tiny drums. It could not be said that they were King's horses or King's men. They were something not quite rational.

It was a winding procession of egg-things, tottering on little stumpy legs, and prancing green shapes that bore a startling resemblance to walking stick insects. The eggs were linked together by dangling wisps of filmy stuff. When they came closer the filmy stuff resolved itself into a net, glimmering, metallic.

They're going to catch Humpty Dumpty when he falls, Wayne thought wildly.

Suddenly the long wall stirred with activity. A dozen little egg-shapes were running along it, dodging and weaving, their tadpole forelimbs quivering.

A shadow, dark, ominous, moved on the plain.

Twang!

The running eggs splintered as they fell. A wailing went up from the advancing procession, long-drawn, shrill. The "King's horses" swerved in closer to the wall, the net floating free.

Too late! The ground was littered with writhing and dying egg shapes, shattered, spilling their yolks. One was not writhing. It was completely bashed in, a flattish horror swimming in its yolk.

Suddenly Ruth screamed. "Look over there! It's one of those angular, headless things. It's aiming at us!"

The blue bowman had stepped out from the shadow of the wall, and was sharply limned in the downslanting radiance. His arms and legs were metallic zigzags, his body an angular shaft. He was slim-waisted, broad-shouldered, a Zeus lightning bolt aping the human form, a cut-out shape like a figure on a lampshade, standing poised and vibrant as he raised his bow.

Wayne swung about, took hold of Ruth and dragged her to the ground. The arrow twanged horribly as it left the bow. They could feel death brushing them as the ghastly, headless figure sprang back into shadows.

Then they were in motion again. They headed straight for the mound, past the procession of toddling ovoids and prancing walking sticks, their faces livid with terror. Another arrow sped past them, raising a flurry of dust as it thudded into the base of the mound.

Then they were climbing up over a tumbled rampart of thrown-up earth, and down into a hollow rimmed with blue shadows that seemed to leap toward them out of the gloom.

"That took courage," a quiet voice said.

The man was sitting on a boulder with a Seral hand blaster cradled in his arms. He was a big man, with massive shoulders and a gaunt-featured face. He had torn off his shirt and made a bandage of it. He sat blinking against the light, his right arm wrapped in the bandage, his eyes deep pools of torment. Empty cartridges lay scattered about at his feet.

He smiled wryly and started to rise—then thought better of it.

"I'm James Bryce!" he said. "How did you get here?"

He gestured toward another boulder as he spoke. "Sit down, man. You're safe for the moment. I've been holding them off with carefully timed blasts."

Wayne helped Ruth to the boulder, and stood for an instant with his back to Bryce,

breathing heavily as he stared across the plain. Then he swung about. Words poured from him, a torrent of words.

When he had finished Bryce nodded grimly. "I see! Pretty gruesome from start to finish. We're trapped in a world we never dreamed existed, and—we've the Orban boy to thank for it!"

Ruth spoke then. "Mother Goose," she whispered. "The Old English Nursery Rhymes. A world that exists only in the Orban boy's mind. Somehow he's made it real, three-dimensional."

Bryce smiled oddly. "You've been thinking that? It's not true, but it does you credit. It means you have at least a toe-hold on reality. You know that reality can't be reshaped to any kind of preconceived mental pattern."

Bryce forced a crooked smile. "What would another dimension be like, logically? Peopled with men and women like ourselves? A mathematician's pipe dream?

"Rubbish, don't you think? Why should intelligence in another world function on a plane that's comprehensible to us? Take the dreams that have found their way into the literature of childhood. What is the literature of childhood? Isn't it, in its purest essence, a world of nightmare fantasy and diffuse cruelty, without rhyme or reason?"

He looked up quickly. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. What made him fall? Poor old Humpty Dumpty! Weep for him—rush to the wall and watch the poor, pitiful attempts that will be made to put him together again.

"Nothing cruel about poor old Humpty Dumpty. He'd tear your heart out. A lovely goofy old egg. Where's the cruelty then? I'll tell you. The picture that devilish fantasy conjures up is the essence of cruelty. A smashed, quivering, alive egg, in torment, scattered, spilling its yolk."

"But—"

Bryce waived a muscular hand. "The world of a child's reading is like a pack of Tarot cards. You know the old stories of children bewitched and tormented by cruel goblins. There's a grotesquerie in it like nothing on earth.

"A child's mind is wide open to it—receptive. A child really sees into that world, in its dreams. Do you know why? That world really exists—as a sober scientific reality. When we grow up we forget to remember."

Bryce's lips tightened. "A child's mental receptivity isn't blunted by the world around it. It grows up in two worlds at once, until it adjusts to our reality. But the author of the Mother Goose rhymes remembered his dreams of childhood more vividly than most men."

Bryce made a deprecatory gesture. "The real Humpty Dumpties are quite a bit different. Living ovoids who are always the victims of a cruel sport, destined to be shot down, and rescued too late by their little stricken fellows.

"There's a doom on all of them. What a weird, wild shooting gallery world this is! Sport, archery. The headless archers. They're cocks of the walk here, I think, swaggering, slim-waisted bullies. But there's something automatic about them. I don't think they're prime movers."

"I'm glad to know that," Wayne grunted grimly.

"The prime movers who created this world may be a kind of puppet master without visible substance. What impressed me from the instant I arrived here was the automatic, clockwork aspect of everything. It's intangible, hard to pin down. But a sensitive man can hardly fail to be aware of it."

"I know what you mean," Ruth whispered.

"Everything's cyclic. Those blackbirds ascend like clay pigeons released in swarms at intervals, and when the eggs fall others take their places on the wall. We haven't penetrated very deeply into this world. Old Mother Hubbard may be here too, with a ravenous dog that isn't a dog, really.

"It may be a dog that keeps going to an empty hole in a cliff wall. He rushes in, barking furiously, and comes out without a bone. The cupboard is bare. Then an arrow pierces him, and he's a dead dog for awhile. Jack and Jill go up a hill, a target for the headless archers.

"They're Jack and Jill in the Nursery Rhymes. Here they may be angular, metallic figures, but horribly vulnerable. The pail of water is shattered, spills and runs like quicksilver into the ground. Jack and Jill pick themselves up, pluck out the arrows and go staggering back up the hill to get some more water, their faces writhing in agony. Or maybe there are Jack and Jill replacements and the first pair die!"

Bryce's gaunt face was deathly pale now in the chill blue light. "It's a hellish clock set

in motion and staying in motion." he added.

"The Orban boy knew what this world was like," Wayne said, slowly. "He called the archers 'blue bowmen.' How does he fit into it?"

"Remember his strange destiny!" Bryce answered. "That's the crux of it, man! He—"

Bryce stiffened in sudden wariness, tightening his grip on the blaster. "Here they come," he warned. "Keep your shoulders down. They converge, shooting with ugly deliberation. But blasting scatters them."

As he spoke three blue archers came into view between the wall and the mound. They emerged from shadows to stand motionless for an instant on the plain.

Sweat ran cold on Wayne's back. The upraised bows were trained on the mound, taut and glittering arcs of metal bisected by gleaming arrow-heads. The shanks of the arrows were drawn back by hands like mailed fists, the bowstrings beaded with light.

THE archers released their bows simultaneously. There was a single sound, like the crack of a whiplash in utter stillness.

It was followed by dull roar. Smoke swirled from the mound as Bryce blasted, blotting the archers from view. When it cleared two of the orignal archers were lying prostrate, but their numbers had been augmented fivefold.

Bryce was cursing softly and holding on to his bandaged arm. "Caught an arrow when I came through," he muttered. "That concussion opened up the wound. Why did it have to be my right arm?"

"Here, let me take that!" Wayne said, wrenching at the blaster.

"I can handle it!" Bryce grunted, in angry protest. But Wayne had the blaster now and was aiming it at the headless figures, his lips a bowstring line.

Twang!

One arrow for an instant that seemed a lifetime, cleaving the air. Then came a dozen arrows, a hundred, in a swirl of brightness above Ruth's terror-wrenched face.

Wayne blasted not once, but four times in hot anger, his throat a throbbing ache. The energy flare blotted out the plain. A blinding pulse beat seemed to throb in the heart of the blast, amidst an expanding whiteness.

When the smoke thinned out the plain was littered with recumbent archers. A few were shattered. It was incredible nerve-torturing to watch metallic zigzags twitch and, pick themselves up, and whip away into shadows like seared leaves.

"That was reckless!" Bryce grunted. "A single blast would have stopped them just as effectively. They can't stand the shattering repercussions!"

Wayne sucked in his breath. For an instant he remained in a crouching attitude, his eyes bright with horror. Then he stood up. "I asked you how the Orban boy fitted into this," he said, grimly. "Let's have the rest of it."

Bryce shrugged. "Consider, man. For generations kids have been brought up on a diet of fantasy and reality. One offsets the other. Children don't know how real the fantasy world is, and the reality around them quickly blots out Humpty Dumpty."

"Well?"

"The Orban boy knew how to read and the fantasy world took on an unnatural brilliance for him. It became his own intimate, private world. He had just the stars of space to look at and that inward vision. Don't you see? He had to get to it. He had to break through the dimensional barrier. It became an obsession with him."

"But how?"

"There were technical, scientific books on that ship. The Orban boy knew how to read and he wasn't a little animal. He was whiplash smart. Even at eight, he had a working grasp of applied physics. He'd talked a lot with his father, knew how to tinker."

Bryce kicked at a loose stone with his toe. "Perfectly normal boys of eight have had I.Q's of one-fifty. Mozart was an accomplished musician at six—a great one at nine. Boy chess wizards crop up in every generation and chess is a three-way game. You've got to peg your naked intelligence into a background of semantics and applied psychology. But some kids get monumental backgrounds just by keeping their eyes and ears open.

"What do we know about human intelligence anyway? Illiterate rustics have mastered atomic theory, using hit and miss techniques. The Orban boy was precocious, granted. But we know even less about precocity than we do about adult intelligence."

Bryce looked at Wayne with a torturing surmise. "That kid slipped away from us for a couple of hours, got to his father's workshop. Sheer carelessness on our part. When I saw him with the machine, I rushed out of

the house, and tried to reason with him. We got into an argument and I started tugging at him.

"Luckily I'd strapped a Seral blaster to my hip, just in case. But it was the blaster that got in my way. It weighed me down—in the wrong direction. When I tripped I didn't have a chance of regaining my balance."

Bryce shrugged grimly. "I've been holding the archers at bay ever since. Funny thing about that machine. It's light—weighs about eight pounds. Orban can carry it, but if you stand directly in front of it your goose is cooked. After I came through I didn't see the machine. It must be invisible from this side!"

Wayne nodded. "We didn't see it either!"

"It's still around, I imagine. When I came through an archer saw me. I caught an arrow in my shoulder. I ripped it out and hurled it from me, and it vanished in a flash of light. You say you saw an arrow come out. Probably it was the same arrow."

Wayne started to speak, but Bryce stopped him. "Listen!" he warned.

From the purple-hollowed middle of the mound there arose a strange, mournful, dirgelike sound. Then up from the mound came a dozen "blackbirds," their lizardlike bodies quivering as they went spiraling into the sky.

No arrows pursued them. There was utter silence on the plain.

"Looks as though we've thrown a scare into the archers for the time being," Wayne muttered, but there was no exaltation in his voice.

Bryce shook his head. "They'll attack again," he said, with grim conviction. "Those birds were simply lucky this time. I wonder if they realize how lucky—or care!"

Ruth whispered: "Six and twenty blackbirds, baked into a pie! When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing! My, what a dainty dish, to set before a king!"

Her voice rose sharply. "Ken, who do you suppose the king was? We haven't seen him! Is there a king?"

"A symbolic embellishment," Bryce snapped. "I'll say it again: Mother Goose is simply this world seen through the distorted mirror of a child's imagination. The author of Mother Goose transformed what he saw here into a medieval fairy tale. We'll never see the king because we have nothing in common with him."

The sky seemed to darken as Bryce spoke. Wayne looked up in chill apprehension, a shudder coursing up his spine.

"Oh, no!" Ruth choked.

But there *was* something high in the sky, swinging slowly down toward the mound. Something globular that wore what looked like a shining crown and shook like a mound of jelly.

Nearer it came and nearer, swinging lower with each vibration of its circular bulk.

It blazed suddenly into sharp visibility. It wasn't a king, and it wore no crown. It was a floating spheroid, veined and translucent, filled with an intricate assortment of moving parts that gave off a continuous whirring sound.

A madness seemed to possess Wayne as he stared up at it. He cupped his hands and shouted: "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" came back in a staccato echo.

"Who are you?"

"Who are you!"

"If it says: 'Who am I?' I'll die!" Ruth screamed hysterically.

"Who am I?" the speroid flung out. "I'll die!"

"Wait!" Bryce gripped Ruth's arm, his lips shaking. "It's a tropism—nothing more. A kind of echo response. You soft-pedaled the 'If it says'—then screamed the rest. It only picked up the last part. It didn't change the question. It simply repeats what it picks up!"

"No—it doesn't," Ruth groaned. "Now it's going to say: 'You'll die!' "

"Not unless you scream it first," Bryce said, with a brittle laugh. "Look, I'll show you."

He cupped his hands. "You're going to win through." he shouted.

"You're going to win through!" came back.

"It's a promise," Bryce shouted.

"It's a promise!"

"You see?" Bryce turned with a relieved grimace. "You seldom get a better answer than that. It's a regular politician's answer. What you want to hear comes back in a vibrant echo that means absolutely nothing."

The gear-and-wheel-filled spheroid was swinging back now, straight up into the sky. It dwindled rapidly, vibrating as it swept from view.

"Well, that was your 'king,'" Bryce said. "I've a hunch it's simply a weird regulatory

mechanism that sweeps down at long intervals. A kind of cog in the clockup setup —a stabilizing flying pendulum that's needed here to keep things moving on an even keel."

Ruth sprang back with a gasp of horror. Three tiny metallic shapes had scurried swiftly over the edge of the hollow and were descending into the blackbird pit with the blindly groping movements of terrified moles.

Moles? Why not mice? Blind mice?

WAYNE was the first to say it. "Three blind mice, see how they run—" He stopped, appalled.

"Finish it," Bryce muttered. "They all ran up to the farmer's wife, who cut off their tails with a carving knife."

He gestured eloquently. "I told you cruelty was of the essence here. It's a savage, senseless, last turn-of-the-screw kind of cruelty. Why mutilate blind mice. Isn't that utterly ghastly? And yet it's in Mother Goose.

"There's hardly a Mother Goose rhyme that doesn't shadow forth this world. The hunters and—the hunted. Creatures pursued by blind cruelty, shot down in flight. Who killed Cock Robin?"

A grim puzzlement seemed to grip Bryce. "Cock Robin! That's the cruelest one of all. It's so devilish in its wicked, eerie malice that some editions of Mother Goose omit it entirely, as not for children!"

He frowned. "Just who was Cock Robin anyway? Why was everyone so horrified? Cock Robin with his bleeding breast, the taut and quivering arrow. Why was Cock Robin so different, almost a stranger to this world? Why did the cruelty pause to wonder? Why did everyone answer: 'Not I! Not I.'

"Why did everyone single out Cock Robin as the one creature in this world who shouldn't have been killed at all?"

Bryce strode back and forth, glancing over the mound as if in chill apprehension.

"A curious thing! Not only the Mother Goose rhymes shadow forth this world. An ancient Chinese vase bears the inscription: 'See how the harsh black birds fly into the bronze sun, pursued by the arrows of darkness!'

"And Lewis Carroll! There are things in Alice in Wonderland that seem to shadow forth this world. Why was Alice so real to generations of children?"

He shrugged. "A few men remembered their childhood visions well, apparently. Too well for comfort. The Looking Glass was simply a symbol. You step through. The Orban boy got at the scientific reality behind the symbol. He actually constructed a dimension-dissolving looking glass!"

Ruth stared at him. "Are you claiming that all children are dangerous little monsters?"

Bryce shook his head. "No. Only very special children. Children who were cut off from all normal activity, as Orban was. Their visions spur them on. But I think we've always known, subconsciously, that a child with too much knowledge would be dangerous. Why do people like to make up rhymes about the wickedness of children. Remember the Little Willie rhymes:

"'Little Willie hung his sister
She was dead before we missed her!
Willie's always up to tricks!
Ain't he cute? He's only six.'"

From somewhere on the plain came an answering whisper, as though the cruel words had goaded the blue world to activity again. A low rustling swept across the plain, ominous, mind-chilling.

"Here they come!" Bryce whispered, reaching for the blaster.

Wayne moved quickly to forestall him. He had the weapon and was leveling it before the psychologist could glower in protest.

A shadow fell on the plain, grew larger. The blue archers were stepping out from the wall with a deadly deliberation, their reflections lengthening as they converged, their Zeus-taut bodies wrapped in a translucent glimmering.

Wayne held his fire until a dozen archers released their bows simultaneously. There was a pulsing at his temples as the trigger clicked. A swirl of whiteness followed the click, a silent whiteness for an instant as brief as a dropped heartbeat. Then a thunderous concussion shook the mound, hurling him backwards. . . .

An hour later Wayne sat with his back to the tumbled earth rampart, his face haggard with strain. A thin smoke was swirling over the mound, an acrid haze which obscured the slope directly below him and blotted out the crouching bulk of Bryce. But he could feel the despair which emanated from Bryce—a palpable force. Bryce spoke suddenly. "I'm glad we saved one blast!" he muttered. "We've got to decide how to use it!"

The words fell on a chill, deadly silence.

Then Ruth uttered a sobbing moan. Wayne knew with grim certainty that Bryce would not attempt to spare her. If he thought the blaster should be turned upon the hollow and held in steady hands, he would say so.

They sat silently together for an instant, not daring to voice what was in their minds.

Then Bryce spoke directly to Ruth. "By heaven, you're a pretty woman!"

A sudden, hot anger swept over Wayne like a flood of molten lava.

"If we had any chance at all," Bryce added, heavily, "Ken would have a rival!"

Wayne suddenly realized that Bryce had more delicacy than he had given him credit for. He had chosen an odd way to announce that there was no hope, but Wayne was glad that he had not phrased it brutally. His anger evaporated.

Twang!

The arrow sped in close, barely missing Wayne. The archers were in motion again. As they drew in toward the mound, their bows thrumming, the air grew thick with deadly arrows in flight.

There was a continuous, deadly twanging, a drumming in the air, a drumming in Wayne's skull—a reeling giddiness. Wayne did not hesitate or swing about to voice an agonized doubt. The suddenness of the attack had settled the issue for him.

The last blast would not be guided by another man's caution. His decision was made, and nothing could alter it.

Wayne blasted with a quick intake of his breath.

The spurting radiation struck the plain with a mighty roar. Wayne felt again the shattering recoil, the shoulder-bruising impact of a heavy weapon leaping in his clasp.

For an instant fire and smoke danced on the plain, swirling over the base of the mound and blotting the archers from view.

Then the smoke thinned, and rolled back over a seared expanse of desolation the more awful because it wasn't quite empty. One archer was still advancing, swaying a little as it climbed the slope through the dissolving smoke, its bow upraised.

The archer was almost at the crest of the mound when Wayne sprang straight at it. With a sickening twang the arrow left the bow and thudded into the earth rampart at Wayne's back. Then Wayne was beating with the blaster against the archer's angular body, swinging with it again and again, pounding with all his strength.

The plain rang with the harsh, strident clang of metal against metal, as though knights in a tourney were colliding headon in a suicidal contest of strength.

With a savageness that amazed him, Wayne fought the archer back down the slope. Eyes wild, lips quivering, he brought the sharp edge of his weapon against the horror's gleaming chest, and slashed downward at the low-slung metal quiver at its waist.

Strange how much courage a man had when his life was forfeit, strange the shining strength, like a shield around the heart, blazing out for all to see!

Arrows were spilling from the archer's quiver and its body was twisting strangely when something seemed to lift it up and hurl it backwards toward the wall. Wayne cried out hoarsely as the writhing horror receded from him, twisting and turning like a gale-lashed leaf. It vanished abruptly, in a blinding flash of light.

And as it vanished a running figure came into view on the plain.

"Orban!"

It was Ruth who shouted it, coming to her feet in wild disbelief. The Orban boy was running straight toward Wayne and waving his arms in urgent appeal.

WAYNE couldn't catch what the Orban boy was shouting. But he could see that the running lad was gesturing him back toward the mound.

In a daze of fevered uncertainty Wayne swung about and started climbing. He heard himself sobbing. His legs threatened to give out, but he managed to gain the crest and fling himself down in the hollow. He lay on his stomach, staring over the rampart, his lungs choked with dust.

Slowly he became aware that Ruth had thrown herself down beside him and was clinging to him in sobbing relief.

The Orban boy came over the crest with his breath coming in choking gasps. He flung himself down directly opposite Wayne, and raised himself on one elbow.

"Had to wait—until I was sure I could get you out," he breathed. "That man—" He gestured toward Bryce. "He's not so important, but you're my friend! Had to save you, Ken!"

Wayne stared, his mouth strangely dry.

"My idea was to hide the machine until I

was equipped right to come into this world, Ken." Orban went on feverishly. "I worked something out, but it wasn't good enough to protect me in here. That's why I asked you to help me hide the machine!"

"Just what did you work out?" Bryce asked. His face was ashen, but his voice was firm enough.

"Just met Ken last night," the Orban boy wheezed, his eyes shining. "But he's the only friend I ever had. He was going to hide me. That's more than you'd do, I bet."

"You're right about that," Bryce said, with a harsh laugh. "I asked you, What did you work out?"

For reply the Orban boy opened his hand. The object which rested on his palm was small, no larger than a jack-knife. It was shaped like a compass. Six tiny glowing knobs projected from it, but otherwise it was unbelievably makeshift in aspect, as though the Orban boy had walked into a toyshop, picked up a compass, and twisted two wires intricately around the floating needle. And now he was displaying his prize with a fierce pride, as though he'd done something remarkable.

"Worked hard at it, in Ken's kitchen," the Orban boy explained. "Took me six hours to get it right."

"You're sure it works now?"

"You bet I'm sure," Orban said, pridefully. "The segments which feed that loop have been moved around, see? They pass right under the contact points. All I have to do is draw the second loop into position by the attraction of the needle."

As he spoke the Orban boy pressed one of the little knobs on the rim of the "compass." The "compass" lighted up.

"Now it's ready!" Orban said.

Bryce stared. "Ready for what?"

The Orban boy cupped his palm over the "compass."

"You'll see. Watch!"

Light from the "compass" streamed out between the Orban boy's fingers and haloed his entire hand. Slowly he raised his hand and turned to Wayne with a triumphant cry.

"Look at what is happening!"

It was impossible not to look. The blue world was in sudden, furious activity. Down from the sky the "King" wobbled, to hang directly over the mound. The blind mice ran backwards out of the blackbird pit and six and twenty blackbirds rose into the sky. And out on the plain stepped a dozen blue archers, their bows upraised.

But the most terrifying thing was the gulf which yawned suddenly on the plain. Out of it stumbled something that looked like a jigsaw giant, bent nearly double. The figure went reeling and stumbling over the plain, as if in unendurable agony.

The figure was metallic, very similar to the archers, but it moved in a dizzyingly crooked way that brought a tortured reeling to Wayne's mind.

"'There was a crooked man and he ran a crooked mile,'" Ruth heard herself screaming.

Twang!

An arrow pierced the blueness, thudding into the shoulders of the crazily weaving figure. The giant stumbled and fell forward, its loose-jointed arms flailing the air. It dragged itself crookedly backwards toward the trap door in the plain, its movements still geometrically insane.

Suddenly the archers froze. They stood rigid, unmoving, their bows held at grotesque angles. The "King" stopped vibrating. It hung motionless above the mound, congealed into the blueness like an ice-frozen jellyfish.

Every other object within view took on an aspect of rigidity. All movement ceased. There was a stillness so absolute even the stirring of a blind mouse would have set up a din. But the mice were stiff, rigid, impaled in a web of stillness.

"By heaven, he's stopped the clock!"

Bryce's stunned cry shattered the human stillness on the mound. But the "King" did not echo back the sound, and nothing on the plain moved.

Orban grinned then, for the first time. "I knew it would work," he exulted. "It had to work. It'll all start up again, in just about three minutes. Can't stop it for long. You've got to get out fast."

"You mean—" Bryce wet his shaking lips. "That little thing—" He waved one arm "—stopped *all that*?"

"Size hasn't a thing to do with power," the Orban boy said, as though he were addressing a child. "Shucks, I could blow up every city on earth—big cities like New York and Chicago—with something half the size of this!"

Ruth swayed.

"I fixed the machine so you can see it from this side," Orban said. ""When you go out, I'll break it up from this side. Come on,

Ken. You got to get around that wall before it all starts up again."

All four of them started off, in the direction Orban indicated, running at top speed.

Nerve-torturing thoughts, that fitted no pattern of sanity or logic, were churning about at the back of Wayne's mind, as he dashed after the youth. They rounded the wall in a run, the Orban boy in the lead, Bryce bringing up the rear.

The wall hadn't changed, but the toppled Humpty Dumpties resembled eggs that had dropped from a cold storage crate. Their tadpole arms had ceased to jerk and their spilled yolks were frozen solid.

The Orban boy paused an instant to nudge an egg with his toe. "The poor little thing!" he murmured, shaking his head. Then he was in motion again.

When the machines swept into view, the Orban boy was breathing heavily, his face tight with strain. But he kept on running until he was directly in front of it. Then he turned and waited for the others to come up.

"I can't go with you, Ken," he said, when Wayne reached his side. "I belong here. Always have—always will!"

He shuffled his feet as he spoke and suddenly, he was thrusting out his hand.

Wayne stared at him in stunned horror. "But you can't remain!" he protested. "When those devilish archers start up again—"

Orban shook his head, squinting back at the wall. "I don't dare leave, Ken! Know what would happen if I did? I'd get careless and there'd be more accidents. People would get killed—everybody on earth, maybe. I know so much in some ways—I'm not safe to be trusted!"

The Orban boy was bending as he spoke, but Wayne did not suspect what he was about to do until he saw the shining croquet wicket looming in the air above him.

The Orban boy was behind the machine, and he was rushing straight toward Ken with the machine held out before him.

It was a little like passing into a warm shower. The light was all around Wayne, lashing against him, before he realized that he was no longer on the plain.

"Good-by, Ken!" came in a dwindling echo of sound. "Sure was great to have a friend!"

Wayne picked himself up from the floor and looked around him. He wasn't alone in the room. Ruth was sitting beside him, Bryce lay on the floor, and the croquet wicket was dwindling to a shapeless lump of metal in a dwindling blaze of light.

Bryce was getting slowly to his feet, and staring about him with fiercely contracted brows, as though he despised Wayne's taste in furnishings and was about to say so.

Bryce went to a chair and sat down. "Nice place you have here, Ken," he said.

SUDDENLY his composure broke. Sweat came out on his face, the back of his hands. He shuddered.

"He'll never come back," he whispered. "We've seen the last of him."

Wayne got up and staggered back against the wall and stared at Bryce.

Bryce made a despairing gesture. "I wish now I'd said a few kind words to him. It was the least I could have done."

"Why?" Wayne was hardly aware that he had spoken.

"Oh, it's a paradox, all right," Bryce murmured. "Just like—the paradox of time travel. Say a man lives now and goes into the past. Doesn't that mean he's always existed in the past. But how can he go back to where he's always been."

Ruth had gotten up and was staring at Bryce with startled eyes. "What has that to do with Orban boy?" she asked.

"Say you went into another dimension today," Bryce said, slowly. "Say it was a kind of timeless dimension—from our point of view. Wouldn't you in a sense exist in that other world from the very creation of that world? Wouldn't you freeze into that world and become a part of it from the start?"

"If someone from our world saw that other world centuries ago, wouldn't he find you there. I think he would."

Bryce paused an instant to stare out the window of Wayne's living room. The murk of an October morning stretched beyond the pane. He stared at Wayne, then at Ruth, as though challenging them to deny that they had just returned from a quite different world.

"You saw that King-clock horror, swinging down from the sky!" he went on. "A mechanical tropism enabled it to echo back sound. Suppose a boy, who never should have gone into that world, was trapped in it. Suppose he shouted his defiance to the sky as the arrows sped toward him.

"Suppose he shouted his name, in anger and fierce pride, recklessly as a defiant boy might well be tempted to do. His name, now and forever, long before he was born into our world, our time, because he'd made himself a timeless part of that timeless world."

"Well?" Wayne's voice was a puzzled whisper.

"A good many boys have nicknames. Young Orban's given name was Phillip, but his father didn't call him that."

Ruth gave a cry. "No! Oh, no!"

"Suppose the King-clock merely repeated the name," Bryce said, gently. "Suppose the boy lay slain on the plain and the King repeated his name, over and over. And the little lad who was to write Mother Goose saw that world in a dream of childhood and heard the name. The author of Mother Goose must have been an imaginative child.

"Remember—he saw the horror only dimly. It bore the name of a familiar bird. Why not a bird lying slain on the plain and everyone in that world asking: 'Who killed Cock Robin? Not I? Not I?' Everyone horrified, appalled, because Cock Robin was a stranger in that world."

"You mean—"

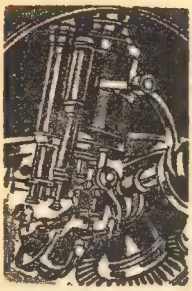
"It was an intangible thing, the uniqueness of Cock Robin, but it must have communicated itself to the author of Mother Goose. He imagined the rest, the protesting voices, the shared horror, and remorse. He made a fantastic little nursery rhyme about it."

Bryce looked at Ruth. "Do you know who Cock Robin was now?" he asked.

Ruth drew closer to Wayne before she spoke, as though she dared not remain alone with such a burden of horror and pity resting its cold weight on her heart.

"His father called him Robin!" she whispered. "Robin! Robin! The Orban boy—he was Cock Robin!"

Unmerciful Heavens!



THE sighting, last July 24, by a couple of Eastern Air Lines pilots and one of their passengers of "a wingless craft, spurting flame like a rocket ship"—coming on top of the "flying disc" sensation of last year—has caused perturbation to many millions of folk.

Associating such reports vaguely with news of supersonic aircraft, of new and impressive rocket development and even of the poor old atom bomb, they find themselves scarcely able to sleep at night. To them the skies are full of darting mystery craft, wingless, motorless, even invisible—all of them potential agents of destruction.

However, these terrors are not new. From the day of the ancients, when warriors were seen battling in the skies on the eve of Julius Caesar's assassination, heavenly manifestations calculated to chill all and sundry to the very marrow have been reported with curious regularity.

The late Charles Fort, the indefatigable cataloguer of such phenomena, listed a number of such reports in LO!—one of his books describing occurrences which science dismissed as fictitious because of its inability to explain them.

From the *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 10, 1891, he dug mention of a 20-foot aircraft, like a seemingly headless monster," propelled by finlike attachments, which was seen five days earlier by a pair of icemen in Crawfordsville, Indiana, at 2 A. M., as well as by the local Methodist minister.

A Mr. W. H. Smith, on September 18, 1877, saw what looked like a winged human form flying over Brooklyn. And a gigantic bird with shining eyes and noisily clashing scales was spotted by many over Copiapo, Chile, in July of 1868.

In 1880, according to the *Lousville Courier-Journal* on July 29 of that year, an object which looked like a man working machinery with hands and feet was sighted by many over the Kentucky metropolis. In the same year appeared reports of something in the sky over Madisonville, Kentucky—"something with a ball at each end," which appeared at times to be circular, at other times oval.

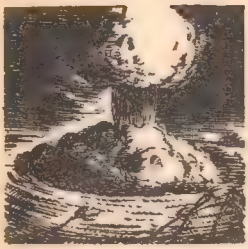
This, of course, could well be a flying disc. They have been reported before, as have virtually every other imaginable sort of flying object, including one that looked like a horse and made swimming motions with its legs.

—*Carter Sprague*

DORMANT

By

A. E. VAN VOGT



OLD was that island. Even the thing that lay in the outer channel exposed to the rude wash of the open sea had never guessed, when it was alive a million years before, that here was a protuberance of primeval earth itself.

The island was roughly three miles long and, at its widest, half a mile across. It curved tensely around a blue lagoon and the thin shape of its rocky, foam-ridden arms and hands came down toward the toe of the island—like a gigantic man bending over, striving to reach his feet and not quite making it.

Through the channel made by that gap between the toes and the fingers came the sea.

The water resented the channel. With an endless patience it fought to break the wall of rock and the tumult of the waters was a special sound, a blend of all that was raucous and unseemly in the eternal quarrel between resisting land and encroaching wave.

At the very hub of the screaming waters lay Iilah, dead now almost forever, forgotten by time and the universe.

Early in 1941, Japanese ships came and ran the gauntlet of dangerous waters into the quiet lagoon. From the deck of one of the ships a pair of curious eyes pondered the thing, where it lay in the path of the rushing sea. But the owner of those eyes was the servant of a government that frowned on extra-military ventures of its personnel.

And so engineer Taku Onilo merely noted in his report that, "At the mouth of this channel there lies a solid shape of glittery rocklike substance about four hundred feet long and ninety feet wide."

The little yellow men built their underground gas and oil tanks and departed towards the setting sun. The water rose and fell, rose and fell again. The days and the years drifted by, and the hand of time was heavy. The seasonal rains arrived on their rough schedule and washed away the marks of man. Green growth sprouted where machines had exposed the raw earth.

The war ended. The underground tanks sagged a little in their beds of earth and cracks appeared in several main pipes. Slowly, the oil drained off and, for years, a yellow-green oil slick brightened the gleam of the lagoon waters.

In the reaches of Bikini Atoll, hundreds of miles away, first one explosion, then another, started in motion an intricate pattern of radioactivated waters. The first seepage of that potent energy reached the island in the early fall of 1946.

It was about six months later that a patient clerk, ransacking the records of the Imperial Japanese navy in Tokyo, reported the existence of the oil tanks. In due time—1948—the destroyer *Coulson* set forth on its routine voyage of examination.

The time of the nightmare was come.

LIEUTENANT Keith Maynard, a masochist of long experience, peered gloomily through his binoculars at the island. He was prepared to find something wrong but he expected a distracting monotony

They knew it was dangerous—the men who found the huge living rock on the lonely Pacific atoll—but not even the greatest scientists could guess its potential evil!

And no man would live to see Sol flare into Nova and burn up the Solar System

of sameness, not something radically different.

"Usual undergrowth," he muttered, "and a backbone of semi-mountain, running like a framework the length of the island, trees—"

He stopped there.

A broad swath had been cut through the palms on the near shoreline. They were not just down—they were crushed deep into a furrow that was already alive with grass and small growth. The furrow, which looked about a hundred feet wide, led upward from the beach to the side of a hill, to where a large rock lay half-buried near the top of the hill.

Puzzled, Maynard glanced down at the Japanese photographs of the island. Involuntarily, he turned towards his executive officer, Lieutenant Gerson.

"Good lord!" he said, "how did that rock get up *there?* It's not on any photographs."

The moment he had spoken he regretted it. Gerson looked at him, with his usual faint antagonism, shrugged and said, "Maybe we've got the wrong island."

Maynard did not answer that. He considered Gerson a queer character. The man's tongue dripped ceaselessly with irony.

"I'd say it weighs about two million tons. The Japs probably dragged it up there to confuse us."

Maynard said nothing. He was annoyed that he had ever made a comment—and particularly annoyed because, for a moment, he had actually thought of the Japs in connection with the rock. The weight estimate, which he instantly recognized as fairly accurate, ended all his wilder thoughts.

If the Japs could move a rock weighing two million tons they had also won the war. Still, it was very curious and deserved investigation—afterwards.

They ran the channel without incident. It was wider and deeper than Maynard had understood from the Jap accounts, which made everything easy. Their midday meal was eaten in the shelter of the lagoon. Maynard noted the oil on the water and issued immediate warnings against throwing matches overboard. After a brief talk with the other officers, he decided that they would set fire to the oil, as soon as they had accomplished their mission and were out of the lagoon.

About one-thirty boats were lowered and they made shore in quick order. In an hour, with the aid of transcribed Japanese blueprints, they located the four buried tanks. It took somewhat longer to assess the dimensions of the tanks and to discover that three of them were empty.

Only the smallest, containing high-octane gasoline, remained leakproof and still full. The value of that was about seventeen thousand dollars, not worth the attention of the larger navy tankers that were still cruising around, picking up odd lots of Japanese and American materiel.

Maynard presumed that a ligher would eventually be dispatched for the gasoline, but that was none of his business.

In spite of the speed with which his job had been accomplished, Maynard climbed wearily up to the deck just as darkness was falling.

He must have overdone it a little because Gerson said too loudly, "Worn out, sir?"

Maynard stiffened. And it was that comment rather than any inclination that decided him not to postpone his exploration of the rock. As soon as possible after the evening meal he called for volunteers.

It was pitch dark as the boat, with seven men and Bosun's Mate Yewell and himself, was beached on the sands under the towering palms.

The party headed inland.

THERE was no moon and the stars were scattered among remnant clouds of the rainy season just past. They walked in the furrow, where the trees had been literally ploughed into the ground. In the pale light of the flashlights the spectacle of numerous trees, burned and planed into a smoothed levelness with the soil, was unnatural.

Maynard heard one of the men mumble, "Must have been some freak of a typhoon did that."

Not only a typhoon, Maynard decided, but a ravenous fire followed by a monstrous wind, so monstrous that—his brain paused. He couldn't imagine any storm big enough to lift a two-million-ton rock to the side of a hill a quarter of a mile long and four hundred feet above sea level.

From nearby, the rock looked like nothing more than rough granite. In the beam of the flashlights it glinted with innumerable streaks of pink. Maynard led his party alongside it and the vastness of it grew upon him as he climbed past its four hundred feet of length and peered up at gleaming walls,

like cliffs looming above him.

The upper end, buried though it was deeper into the ground, rose at least fifty feet above his head.

The night had grown uncomfortably warm. Maynard was perspiring freely. He enjoyed a moment of weary pleasure in the thought that he was doing his duty under unpleasant circumstances. He stood uncertain, gloomily savoring the intense primitive silence of the night.

"Break off some samples here and there," he said finally. "Those pink streaks look interesting."

It was a few seconds later that a man's scream of agony broke through the thrall of darkness.

Flashlights blinked on. They showed Seaman Hicks twisting on the ground beside the rock. In the bright flame of the lights, the man's wrist showed as a smoldering, blackened husk with the entire hand completely burned off.

He had touched Iilah.

Maynard gave the miserable wretch morphine and they rushed him back to the ship. Radio contact was established with base and a consulting surgeon gave cut by cut instructions on the operation. It was agreed that a hospital plane would be dispatched for the patient.

There must have been some puzzlement at headquarters as to how the accident had occurred, because "further information" was requested about the "hot" rock. By morning the people at the other end were calling it a meteorite. Maynard, who did not normally question opinions offered by his superiors, frowned over the identification, and pointed out that this meteorite weighed two million tons and rested on the surface of the island.

"I'll send the assistant engineer officer to take its temperature," he said.

An engine-room thermometer registered the rock's surface temperature at eight hundred-odd degrees Fahrenheit. The answer to that was a question that shocked Maynard.

"Why, yes," he replied, "we're getting mild radioactive reactions from the water but nothing else. And nothing serious. Under the circumstances we'll withdraw from the lagoon at once and await the ships with the scientists."

He ended that conversation, pale and shaken. Nine men, including himself, had walked along within a few yards of the rock, well within the deadly danger zone. In fact, even the *Coulson*, more than half a mile away, would have been affected.

But the gold leaves of the electroscope stood out stiff and the Geiger-Mueller counter clucked only when placed in the water and then only at long intervals.

Relieved, Maynard went down to have another look at Seaman Hicks. The injured man slept uneasily but he was not dead, which was a good sign. When the hospital plane arrived there was a doctor aboard, who attended Hicks and then gave everyone on the destroyer a blood-count test. He came up on deck, a cheerful young man, and reported to Maynard.

"Well, it can't be what they suspect," he said. "Everybody's okay, even Hicks, except for his hand. That burned awfully quick, if you ask me, for a temperature of only eight hundred."

"I think his hand stuck," said Maynard. And he shuddered. In his fashion he had mentally experienced the entire accident.

"So that's the rock," said Dr. Clason. "Does seem odd how it got there."

They were still standing there five minutes later when a hideous screaming from below deck made a discordant sound on the still air of that remote island lagoon.

SOMETHING stirred in the depths of Iilah's awareness of himself, something that he had intended to do—he couldn't remember what.

That was the first real thought he had in late 1946, when he felt the impact of outside energy. And stirred with returning life.

The outside flow waxed and waned. It was abnormally, abysmally dim. The crust of the planet that he knew had palpitated with the ebbing but potent energies of a world not yet cooled from its sun state.

It was only slowly that Iilah realized the extent of the disaster that was his environment. At first he was inwardly inclined, too pallidly alive to be interested in externals.

He forced himself to become more conscious of his environment. He looked forth with his radar vision out upon a strange world.

He was lying on a shallow plateau near the top of a mountain. The scene was desolate beyond his memory. There was not a glint nor pressure of atomic fire—not a bubble of boiling rock nor a swirl of energy heaved skyward by some vast interior explosion.

He did not think of what he saw as an island surrounded by an apparently limitless ocean. He saw the land below the water as well as above it.

His vision, based as it was on ultra-ultra short waves, could not see water.

He recognized that he was on an old and dying planet, where life had long since become extinct.

Alone and dying on a forgotten planet—if he could only find the source of the energy that had revived him.

By a process of simple logic he started down the mountain in the direction from which the current of atomic energy seemed to be coming. Somehow, he found himself below it and had to levitate himself heavily back up. Once started upward, he headed for the nearest peak, with the intention of seeing what was on the other side.

As he propelled himself out of the invisible, unsensed waters of the lagoon, two diametrically opposite phenomena affected him. He lost all contact with the water-borne current of atomic energy. And, simultaneously, the water ceased to inhibit the neutron and deuteron activity of his body.

His life took on an increased intensity. The tendency to slow stiflement ended. His great form became a self-sustaining pile, capable of surviving for the normal radioactive lifespan of the elements that composed it—still on an immensely less than normal activity level for him.

Iilah thought, "There was something I was going do."

The flow of electrons through a score of gigantic cells as he strained to remember increased, then slowed gradually when no memory came.

The fractional increase of his life energy brought with it a wider, more exact understanding of his situation. Wave on wave of perceptive radaric forces flowed from him to the Moon, to Mars, to all the planets of the Solar System—and the echoes that came back were examined with an alarmed awareness that out there, too, were dead bodies.

He was caught in the confines of a dead system, prisoned until the relentless exhaustion of his material structure brought him once more to *rapport* with the dead mass of the planet on which he was marooned.

He realized now that he had been dead. Just how it had happened he could not recall, except that explosively violent, frustrating substance had belched around him, buried him and snuffed out his life processes. The atomic chemistry involved must eventually have converted the stuff into a harmless form, no longer capable of hindering him. But he was dead by then.

Now he was alive again, but in so dim a fashion that there was nothing to do but wait for the end. He waited. . . .

In 1948 he watched the destroyer float towards him through the sky. Long before it slowed and stopped just below him, he had discovered that it was not a life-form related to him. It manufactured a dull internal heat and, through its exterior walls, he could see the vague glow of fires.

ALL that first day, Iilah waited for the creature to show awareness of him. But not a wave of life emanated from it. And yet it floated in the sky above the plateau, an impossible phenomenon, utterly outside all his experience.

To Iilah, who had no means of sensing water, who could not even imagine air and whose ultra waves passed through human beings as if they did not exist, the reaction could only mean one thing—here was an alien life form that had adapted itself to the dead world around him.

Gradually, Iilah grew excited. The thing could move freely above the surface of the planet. It would know if any source of atomic energy remained anywhere. The problem was, to get into communication with it.

The sun was high on the meridian of another day when Iilah directed the first questioning pattern of thought towards the destroyer. He aimed straight at the vaguely glowing fires in the engine room, where, he reasoned, would be the intelligence of the alien creature.

The thirty-four men who died in the spaces in and around the engine room and the fire room were buried on shore. Their surviving comrades, including all officers, moved half a mile up the east coast. And at first they expected to stay there until the abandoned *Coulson* ceased to give off dangerous radioactive energies.

On the seventh day, when transport planes were already dumping scientific equipment and personnel, three of the men fell sick and their blood count showed a fateful decrease in the number of red corpuscles. Although no orders had arrived, Maynard took alarm and ordered the entire crew shipped for

observation to Hawaii.

He allowed the officers to make their own choice, but advised the second engineer officer, the first gunnery officer and several ensigns who had helped hoist the dead men up to deck, to take no chances, but to grab space on the first planes.

Although all were ordered to leave, several crew members asked permission to remain. And, after a careful questioning by Gerson, a dozen men who could prove that they had not been near the affected area, were finally permitted to stay.

Maynard would have preferred to see Gerson himself depart, but in this he was disappointed. Of the officers who had been aboard the destroyer at the time of the disaster, Lieutenants Gerson, Lausson and Haury, the latter two being gunnery officers, and Ensigns McPelty, Roberts and Manchioff, remained on the beach.

Among the higher ratings remaining behind were the chief commissary steward, Jenkins, and chief bosun's mate Yewell.

The navy group was ignored except that several times requests were made that they move their tents out of the way. Finally, when it seemed evident that they would be crowded out once more, Maynard in annoyance ordered the canvas moved well down the coast, where the palms opened up to form a grassy meadow.

Maynard grew puzzled, then grim, as the weeks passed and no orders arrived concerning the disposal of his command. In one of the Stateside papers that began to follow the scientists, the bulldozers and cement mixers onto the island he read an item in an "inside" column, that gave him his first inkling.

According to the columnist, there had been a squabble between navy bigwigs and the civilian members of the Atomic Control Board over control of the investigation. With the result that the navy had been ordered to "stay out."

MAYNARD read the account with mixed feelings and a dawning understanding that he was *the* navy representative on the island. The realization included a thrilling mental visualization of himself rising to the rank of admiral—if he handled the situation right. Just what would be right, aside from keeping a sharp eye on everything, he couldn't decide.

It was an especially exquisite form of self-torture.

He couldn't sleep. He spent his days wandering as unobtrusively as possible through the ever vaster encampment of the army of scientists and their assistants. At night he had several hiding places from which he watched the brilliantly lighted beach.

It was a fabulous oasis of brightness in the dark vaulting vastness of a Pacific night. For a full mile string upon string of lights spread along the whispering waters. They silhouetted and spotlighted the long, thick, back-curving, cement-like walls that reared up eerily, starting at the rim of the hill. Protective walls that were already soaring up around the rock itself, striving to block it off from all outside contact.

Always, at midnight, the bulldozers ceased their roarings, the cement mixing trucks dumped their last loads and scurried down the make-shift beach road and so to silence. The entire, already intricate organization settled into an uneasy slumber—and Maynard waited with the painful patience of a man doing more than his duty, usually until around one o'clock, when he too would make his way to his bed.

The secret habit paid off. He was the only man who actually witnessed the rock climb to the top of the hill.

It was a stupendous event. The time was about a quarter to one and Maynard was on the point of calling it a day when he heard the sound. It was like a truck emptying a load of gravel. For a bare moment he thought of it entirely in relation to his hiding place.

His night-spying activities were going to be found out.

An instant after that the rock reared up into the brilliance of the lights.

There was a roaring now of cement barriers, crumbling before that irresistible movement. Fifty, sixty, then ninety feet of monster rock loomed up above the hill, and slid with a heavy power over the crown.

And stopped.

For two months Iilah had watched the freighters breast the channel. Just why they followed that route interested him. And he wondered if there was some limitation on them, that kept them at such an exact level.

What was more interesting by far, however, was that in every case the aliens would slide around the island, and disappear behind a high promontory that was the beginning of

the east shore. In every case, after they had been gone for a few days, they would slide into view again, glide through the channel, and gradually move off through the sky.

During those months, Iilah caught tantalizing glimpses of small but much faster winged ships that shot down from a great height—and disappeared behind the crest of the hill to the east.

Always to the east. His curiosity grew enormous, but he was reluctant to waste energy. And it was not until he grew aware of a night-time haze of lights that brightened the eastern sky at night, that he finally set off the more violent explosions on his lower surface, that made directive motion possible.

He climbed the last seventy or so feet to the top of the hill. And regretted it immediately.

One ship lay a short distance offshore. The haze of light along the eastern slope seemed to have no source. As he watched, scores of trucks and bulldozers raced around, some of them coming quite close to him.

Just what they wanted, or what they were doing he could not make out. He sent several questioning thought waves at various of the objects, but there was no response.

He gave it up as a bad job.

THE rock was still resting on the top of the hill the next morning, poised so that both sides of the island were threatened by the stray bursts of energy which it gave off so erratically.

Maynard heard his first account of the damage done from Jenkins, the chief commissary steward. Seven truck drivers and two bulldozer men dead, a dozen men suffering from glancing burns—and two months labor wrecked.

There must have been a conference among the scientists, for, shortly after noon, trucks and bulldozers, loaded with equipment, began to stream past the navy camp. A seaman, dispatched to follow them, reported that they were setting up camp on the point at the lower end of the island.

Just before dark a notable event took place in the social history of the island. The director of the Project, together with four executive scientists, walked into the lighted area and asked for Maynard.

The group was smiling and friendly. There was handshaking all around. Maynard introduced Gerson, who unfortunately (so far as Maynard was concerned) was in the camp at the moment. And then the visiting delegation got down to business.

"As you know," said the director, "the *Coulson* is only partially radioactive. The rear gun turret is quite unaffected, and we accordingly request that you cooperate with us and fire on the rock until it is broken into sections."

"Huh!" said Maynard.

It took only a moment for him to recover from his astonishment, and to know what he would answer to that.

At no time, during the next few days, did Maynard question the belief of the scientists that the rock should be broken up and so rendered harmless. He refused their request and then doggedly continued to refuse it.

It was not until the third day that he thought of a reason.

"Your precautions, gentlemen," he said, "are not sufficient. I do not consider that moving the camp out to the point is a sufficient safeguard in the event that the rock should blow up. Now, of course, if I should receive a command from a naval authority to do as you wish . . ."

He left that sentence dangling—and saw from their disappointed facts that there must have been a feverish exchange of radio messages with their own headquarters. The arrival of a Kwajalein paper on the fourth day quoted a "high" Washington naval officer as saying that, "any such decisions must be left to the judgment of the naval commander on the island."

And that, if a properly channeled request was made, the navy would be glad to send an atomic expert of its own to the scene.

It was obvious to Maynard that he was handling the situation exactly as his superiors desired. The only thing was that, even as he finished reading the account, the silence was broken by the unmistakable bark of a destroyer's five-inch guns, that sharpest of all gunfire sounds.

Unsteadily Maynard climbed to his feet. An awful suspicion was on him. A swift glance around the camp showed that Gerson and his crony, gunnery officer Haury, were nowhere in sight.

His anger was instantly personal. He began to climb to the nearest height. Before he reached it the second shattering roar came from the other side of the lagoon, and once again an ear-splitting explosion echoed from the vicinity of the rock.

Maynard reached his vantage point and,

through his binoculars, saw about a dozen men scurrying over the aft deck in and about the rear gun turret. It was impossible to make out if Gerson and Haury were among those aboard. There seemed to be no uniforms.

His first terrible suspicion faded. A new and grimmer fury came, this time against the camp director, and a determination to assure himself that every man assisting on the destroyer was arrested for malicious and dangerous trespass.

A vague thought came that it was a sorry day indeed when inter-bureau squabbles could cause such open defiance of the armed forces, as if nothing more was involved than struggle for power. But that thought faded as swiftly as it came.

He waited for the third firing, then hurried down the hill to his camp. Swift commands to the men and officers sent eight of them to positions along the shore of the island, where they could watch boats trying to land.

With the rest Maynard headed towards the nearest navy boat. He had to take the long way around, by way of the point, and there must have been radio communication between the point and those on the ship, for a motor boat was just disappearing around the far end of the island when Maynard approached the now silent and deserted *Coulton*.

He hesitated. Should he give chase? A careful study of the rock proved it to be apparently unbroken. The failure cheered him, but it also made him cautious. It wouldn't do for his superiors to discover that he had not taken the necessary precautions to prevent the destroyer being boarded.

He was still pondering the problem when Iilah started down the hill, straight towards the destroyer.

IILAH saw the first bright puff from the destroyer's guns. And then he had a moment during which he observed an object flash towards him. In the old, old times he had developed defences against hurtling objects. Quite automatically now, he tensed for the blow of this one.

The object, instead of merely striking him with its hardness, exploded. The impact was stupendous. His protective crust cracked. The concussion blurred and distorted the flow from every electronic plate in his great mass.

Instantly the automatic stabilizing "tubes" sent out balancing impulses. The hot, internal, partly-rigid, partly-fluid matter that made up the greater portion of his body, grew hotter, more fluidic.

The weaknesses induced by that tremendous concussion accepted the natural union of a liquid—and hardened instantly under enormous pressures.

Sane again, Iilah considered what had happened. An attempt at communication?

The possibility excited him. Instead of closing the gap in his outer wall he hardened the matter immediately behind it, thus cutting off wasteful radiation.

He waited.

Again, the hurtling object, and the enormously potent blow, as it struck him. . . . After a dozen blows, each with its resulting disaster to his protective shell, Iilah writhed with doubts.

If these were messages he could not receive them or understand. He began reluctantly to allow the chemical reactions that sealed the protective barrier. Faster than he could seal the holes the hurtling objects breached his defences.

And still he did not think of what had happened as an attack.

In all his previous existence he had never been attacked in such a fashion. Just what methods had been used against him, Iilah could not remember. But certainly nothing so purely molecular.

The conviction that it was an attack came reluctantly and he felt no anger. The reflex of defense in him was logical, not emotional. He studied the destroyer and it seemed to him that his purpose must be to drive it away.

And he must drive away every similar creature that tried to come near him. All the scurrying objects he had seen when he mounted the crest of the hill—all that must depart. Everything eventually, but first the destroyer.

He started down the hill.

The creature floating above the plateau had ceased exuding flame. As Iilah eased himself near it, the only sign of life was a smaller object that darted alongside it.

There was a moment then when Iilah entered the water. That was a shock. He had almost forgotten that there was a level of this desolate mountain below which his life forces were affected.

He hesitated.

Then, slowly, he slid further down into

the depressing area, conscious that he had attained a level of strength that he could maintain against such a purely negative pressure.

The destroyer began to fire at him. The shells, delivered at point-blank range, poked deep holes into the ninety-foot cliff with which Iilah faced his enemy.

As that wall of rock touched the destroyer the firing stopped. (Maynard and his men, having defended the *Coulson* as long as possible, tumbled over the far side into their boat and raced away as fast as possible.)

Iilah shoved. The pain that he felt from those titanic blows was the pain that comes to all living creatures experiencing partial dissolution.

Laboriously, his body repaired itself. And with anger and hatred and fear now he shoved. In a few minutes he had tangled the curiously unwieldy structure in the rocks that rose up, to form the edge of the plateau. Beyond was the sharp declining slope of the mountain.

A CURIOUS thing happened. Once among the rocks, the creature started to shudder and shake, as if caught by some inner destructive force. It fell over on its side and lay there like some wounded thing, quivering and breaking up.

It was an amazing spectacle. Iilah withdrew from the water, reclimbed the mountain, and plunged down into the sea on the other side, where a freighter was just getting under way. It swung around the promontory, and successfully floated through the channel and out, coasting along high above the bleak valley that fell away beyond the breakers. It moved along for several miles, then slowed and stopped.

Iilah would have liked to chase it further, but he was limited to ground movement. And so, the moment the freighter had stopped, he turned and headed towards the point, where all the small objects were cluttered.

He did not notice the men who plunged into the shallows near the shore and from that comparative safety watched the destruction of their equipment. Iilah left a wake of burning and crushed vehicles. The few drivers who tried to get their machines away became splotches of flesh and blood inside and on the metal of their machines.

There was a fantastic amount of stupidity and panic. Iilah moved at a speed of about eight miles an hour. Three hundred and seventeen men were caught in scores of individual traps and crushed by a monster that did not even know they existed.

Each man must have felt himself personally pursued.

Afterward Iilah climbed to the nearest peak and studied the sky for further interlopers.

Only the freighter remained, a shadowy threat some four miles away.

Darkness cloaked the island, slowly. Maynard moved cautiously through the grass, flashing his flashlight directly in front of him on a sharp downwards slant.

Every little while he called out, "Anybody around?"

It had been like that for hours now. Through the fading day they had searched for survivors, each time loading them aboard their boat and ferrying them through the channel and out to where the freighter waited.

The orders had come through by radio. They had forty-eight hours to get clear of the island. After that the bomb run would be made by a drone plane.

Maynard pictured himself walking along on this monster-inhabited, night-enveloped island. And the shuddery thrill that came was almost pure unadulterated pleasure. He felt himself pale with a joyous terror.

It was like the time when his ship had been among those shelling a Jap-held beach. He had been gloomy until, suddenly, he had pictured himself out there on the beach at the receiving end of the shells.

He began to torture himself with the possibility that, somehow, he might be left behind when the freighter finally withdrew.

A moan from the near darkness ended that thought. In the glow of the flashlight Maynard saw a vaguely familiar face. The man had been smashed by a falling tree.

As executive officer Gerson came forward and administered morphine, Maynard bent closer to the injured man and peered at him anxiously.

It was one of the world-famous scientists on the island. Ever since the disaster the radio messages had been asking for him. There was not a scientific body on the globe that cared to commit itself to the navy bombing plan until he had given his opinion.

"Sir," began Maynard, "what do you think about—"

He stopped. He settled mentally back on

his heels.

Just for a moment he had forgotten that the naval authorities had already ordered the atomic bomb dropped, after being given governmental authority to do as they saw fit.

The scientist stirred. "Maynard," he croaked, "there's something funny about that creature. Don't let them do any—"

His eyes grew bright with pain. His voice trailed.

It was time to push questions. The great man would soon be deep in a doped sleep and he would be kept that way. In a moment it would be too late.

The moment passed.

Lieutenant Gerson climbed to his feet. "There, that ought to do it, captain." He turned to the seamen carrying the stretchers. "Two of you take this man back to the boat. Careful. I've put him asleep."

Maynard followed the stretcher without a word. He had a sense of having been saved from the necessity of making a decision rather than of having made one.

The night dragged on.

THE morning dawned grayly. Shortly after the sun came up a tropical shower stormed across the island and rushed off eastward.

The sky grew amazingly blue and the world of water all around seemed motionless, so calm did the sea become.

Out of the blue distance, casting a swiftly moving shadow on that still ocean, flew the drone plane.

Long before it came in sight, Iilah sensed the load it carried. He quivered through his mass. Enormous electron tubes waxed and waned with expectancy and, for a brief while, he thought it was one of his own kind coming near.

As the plant drew closer he sent cautious thoughts towards it. Several planes, to which he had directed his thought waves, had twisted jerkily in mid-air and tumbled down out of control.

This one did not deviate from its course. When it was almost directly overhead a large object dropped from it, turned lazily over and over as it curved towards Iilah. It was set to explode about a hundred feet above the target.

The timing was perfect, the explosion titanic.

As soon as the blurring effects of so much new energy had passed, the now fully alive Iilah thought in a quiet though rather startled comprehension, "Why, of course, that's what I was trying to remember. That's what I was supposed to do."

He was puzzled that he could have forgotten. He had been sent during the course of an interstellar war—which apparently was still going on. He had been dropped on the planet under enormous difficulties and had been instantly snuffed out by enemy frustrators.

Now, he was ready to do his job.

He took test sightings on the sun and on the planets that were within reach of his radar signals. Then he set in motion an orderly process that would dissolve all the shields inside his own body.

He gathered his pressure forces for the final thrust that would bring the vital elements hard together at exactly the calculated moment.

The explosion that knocked a planet out of its orbit was recorded on every seismograph on the globe.

It would be some time, however, before astronomers would discover that earth was falling into the sun.

And no man would live to see Sol flare into Nova brightness, and burn up the Solar System before gradually sinking back into a dim G state.

Even if Iilah had known that it was not the same war that had raged ten thousand million centuries before, he would have had no choice but to do as he did.

Robot atom bombs do not make up their own minds.

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by JOHN D.

She stood there, right in the middle of the gawk

Ring Around

THE prosecuting attorney was a lean specimen named Amery Heater. The buildup given the murder trial by the newspapers had resulted in a welter of open-mouthed citizens who jammed the golden oak courtroom.

Bill Maloney, the defendant, was sleepy and bored. He knew he had no business being bored. Not with twelve righteous citizens who, under the spell of Amery Heater's quiet, confidential oratory were beginning to look at Maloney as though he were a fiend among fiends.

The August heat was intense and flies buzzed around the upper sashes of the dusty windows. The city sounds drifted in the open windows, making it necessary for Amery Heater to raise his voice now and again.

But though Bill Maloney was bored, he

Bill Maloney Opens the Doorway to Other

MacDONALD

the Redhead

was also restless and worried. Mostly he was worried about Justin Marks, his own lawyer.

Marks cared but little for this case. But, being Bill Maloney's best friend, he couldn't very well refuse to handle it. Justin Marks was a proper young man with a Dewey mustache and frequent daydreams about Justice Marks of the Supreme Court. He somehow didn't feel that the Maloney case was going to help him very much.

Particularly with the very able Amery Heater intent on getting the death penalty.

The judge was a puffy old citizen with signs of many good years at the brandy bottle, the hundreds of gallons of which surprisingly had done nothing to dim the keenness of eye or brain.

Bill Maloney was a muscular young man with a round face, a round chin and a look

of sleepy skepticism. A sheaf of his coarse, corn-colored hair jutted out over his forehead. His eyes were clear, deep blue.

He stifled a yawn, remembering what Justin Marks had told him about making a good impression on the jury. He singled out a plump lady juror in the front row and winked solemnly at her. She lifted her chin with an audible sniff.

No dice there. Might as well listen to Amery Heater.

". . . . and we, the prosecution, intend to prove that on the evening of July tenth, William Howard Maloney did murderously attack his neighbor, James Finch and did kill James Finch by crushing his skull. We intend to prove there was a serious dispute between these men, a dispute that had continued for some time. We further intend to prove that the cause of this dispute was the dissolute life being led by the defendant."

AMERY HEATER droned on and on. The room was too hot. Bill Maloney slouched in his chair and yawned. He jumped when Justin Marks hissed at him. Then he remembered that he had yawned and he smiled placatingly at the jury. Several of them looked away, hurriedly.

Fat little Doctor Koobie took the stand. He was sworn in and Amery Heater, polite and respectful, asked questions which established Koobie's name, profession and presence at the scene of the "murder" some fifty minutes after it had taken place.

"And now, Dr. Koobie, would you please describe in your own words exactly what you found."

Koobie hitched himself in his chair, pulled his trousers up a little over his chubby knees and said, "No need to make this technical. I was standing out by the hedge between the two houses. I was on Jim Finch's side of the hedge. There was a big smear of blood around. Some of it was spattered on the hedge. Barberry, I think. On the ground there was some hunks of brain tissue, none of them bigger than a dime. Also a piece of scalp maybe two inches square. Had Jim's hair on it all right. Proved that in the lab. Also found some pieces of bone. Not many." He smiled peacefully. "Guess old Jim is dead all right. No question of that. Blood was his and the hair was his."

Three jurors swallowed visibly and a fourth began to fan himself vigorously.

Koobie answered a few other questions and then Justin Marks took over the cross-examination.

"What would you say killed Jim Finch?"

Many people gasped at the question, having assumed that the defence would be that, lacking a body, there was no murder.

Koobie put a fat finger in the corner of his mouth, took it out again. "Couldn't rightly say."

"Could a blow from a club or similar weapon have done it?"

"Good Lord, no! Man's head is a pretty durable thing. You'd have to back him up against a solid concrete wall and bust him with a full swing with a baseball bat and you still wouldn't do that much hurt. Jim was standing right out in the open."

"Dr. Koobie, imagine a pair of pliers ten feet long and porportionately thick. If a pair of pliers like that were to have grabbed Mr. Finch by the head, smashing it like a nut in a nut-cracker, could it have done that much damage?"

Koobie pulled his nose, tugged on his ear, frowned and said, "Why, if it clamped down real sudden like, I imagine it could. But where'd Jim go?"

"That's all, thank you," Justin Marks said.

Amery Heater called other witnesses. One of them was Anita Hempflet.

Amery said, "You live across the road from the defendant?"

Miss Anita Hempflet was fiftyish, big-boned, and of the same general consistency as the dried beef recommended for Canadian canoe trips. Her voice sounded like finger-nails on the third grade blackboard.

"Yes I do. I've lived there thirty-five years. That Maloney person, him sitting right over there, moved in two years ago, and I must say that I . . ."

"You are able to see Mr. Maloney's house from your windows?"

"Certainly!"

"Now tell the court when it was that you first saw the red-headed woman."

She licked her lips. "I first saw that . . . that woman in May. A right pleasant morning it was, too. Or it was until I saw her. About ten o'clock, I'd say. She was right there in Maloney's front yard, as bold as brass. Had on some sort of shiny silver thing. You couldn't call it a dress. Too short for that. Didn't half cover her the way a lady ought to be covered. Not by half. She was . . ."

"What was she doing?"

"Well, she come out of the house and she stopped and looked around as though she was surprised at where she was. My eyes are good. I could see her face. She looked all around. Then she sort of slouched, like she was going to keel over or something. She walked real slow down toward the gate. Mr. Maloney came running out of the house and I heard him yell to her. She stopped. Then he was making signs to her, for her to go back into the house. Just like she was deaf or something. After a while she went back in. I guessed she probably was made deaf by that awful bomb thing the government lost control of near town three days before that."

"You didn't see her again?"

"Oh, I saw her plenty of times. But after that she was always dressed more like a girl should be dressed. Far as I could figure out, Mr. Maloney was buying her clothes in town. It wasn't right that anything like that should be going on in a nice neighborhood. Mr. Finch didn't think it was right either. Runs down property values, you know."

"In your knowledge, Miss Hempflet, did Mr. Maloney and the deceased ever quarrel?"

"They started quarreling a few days after that woman showed up. Yelling at each other across the hedge. Mr. Finch was always scared of burglars. He had that house fixed up so nobody could get in if he didn't want them in. A couple of times I saw Bill Maloney pounding on his door and rapping on the windows. Jim wouldn't pay any attention."

Justin cross-examined.

"You say, Miss Hempflet, that the defendant was going down and shopping for this woman, buying her clothes. In your knowledge, did he buy her anything else?"

Anita Hempflet sniggered. "Say so! Guess she must of been feeble minded. I asked around and found out he bought a blackboard and chalk and some kids' books."

"Did you make any attempt to find out where this woman came from, this woman who was staying with Mr. Maloney?"

"Should say I did! I know for sure that she didn't come in on the train or Dave Wattle would've seen her. If she'd come by bus, Myrtle Gisco would have known it. Johnny Farness didn't drive her in from the airport. I figure that any woman who'd live openly with a man like Maloney must have hitchhiked into town. She didn't come any other way."

"That's all, thank you," Justin Marks said.

MALONEY sighed. He couldn't understand why Justin was looking so worried. Everything was going fine. According to plan. He saw the black looks the jury was giving him, but he wasn't worried. Why, as soon as they found out what had actually happened, they'd be all for him. Justin Marks seemed to be sweating.

He came back to the table and whispered to Bill, "How about temporary insanity?"

"I guess it's okay if you like that sort of thing."

"No. I mean as a plea!"

Maloney stared at him. "Justy, old boy. Are you nuts? All we have to do is tell the truth."

Justin Marks rubbed his mustache with his knuckle and made a small bleating sound that acquired him a black look from the judge.

Amery Heater built his case up very cleverly and very thoroughly. In fact, the jury had Bill Maloney so definitely electrocuted that they were beginning to give him sad looks—full of pity.

It took Amery Heater two days to complete his case. When it was done, it was a solid and shining structure, every discrepancy explained—everything pinned down. Motive. Opportunity. Everything.

On the morning of the third day, the court was tense with expectancy. The defence was about to present its case. No one know what the case was, except, of course, Bill Maloney, Justin Marks, and the unworldly red-head who called herself Rejapachalandakeena. Bill called her Keena. She hadn't appeared in court.

Justin Marks stood up and said to the hushed court, "Your Honor. Rather than summarize my defence at this point, I would like to put William Maloney on the stand first and let him tell the story in his own words."

The court buzzed. Putting Maloney on the stand would give Amery Heater a chance to cross-examine. Heater would rip Maloney to tiny shreds. The audience licked its collective chops.

"Your name?"

"William Maloney, 12 Braydon Road."

"And your occupation?"

"Tinkering. Research, if you want a fancy name."

"Where do you get your income?"

"I've got a few gimmicks patented. The royalties come in."

"Please tell the court all you know about this crime of which you are accused. Start at the beginning, please."

Bill Maloney shoved the blonde hair back off his forehead with a square, mechanic's hand and smiled cheerfully at the jury. Some of them, before they realized it, had smiled back. They felt the smiles on their lips and sobered instantly. It wasn't good form to smile at a vicious murderer.

Bill slouched in the witness chair and laced his fingers across his stomach.

"It all started," he said, "the day the army let that rocket get out of hand on the seventh of May. I've got my shop in my cellar. Spend most of my time down there.

"That rocket had an atomic warhead, you know. I guess they've busted fifteen generals over that affair so far. It exploded in the hills forty miles from town. The jar upset some of my apparatus and stuff. Put it out of kilter. I was sore.

"I turned around, cussing away to myself, and where my coal bin used to be, there was a room. The arch leading into the room was wide and I could see in. I tell you, it really shook me up to see that room there. I wondered for a minute if the bomb hadn't given me delusions.

"The room I saw didn't have any furniture in it. Not like furniture we know. It had some big cubes of dull silvery metal, and some smaller cubes. I couldn't figure out the lighting.

"Being a curious cuss, I walked right through the arch and looked around. I'm a great one to handle things. The only thing in the room I could pick up was a gadget on top of the biggest cube. It hardly weighed a thing.

"In order to picture it, you've got to imagine a child's hoop made of silvery wire. Then right across the wire imagine the blackest night you've ever seen, rolled out into a thin sheet and stretched tight like a drumhead on that wire hoop.

"As I was looking at it I heard some sort of deep vibration and there I was, stumbling around in my coal bin. The room was gone. But I had that darn hoop in my hand. That hoop with the midnight stretched across it.

"I took it back across to my workbench where the light was better. I held it in one hand and poked a finger at that black stuff. My finger went right through. I didn't feel a thing. With my finger still sticking through it, I looked on the other side.

"It was right there that I named the darn thing. I said, 'Gawk!' And that's what I've called it ever since. The Gawk. My finger didn't come through on the other side. I stuck my whole arm through. No arm. I pulled it back out. Quick. Arm was okay. Somehow it seemed warmed on the other side of the gawk.

"Well, you can imagine what it was like for me, a tinkerer, to get my hands on a thing like that. I forgot all about meals and so on. I had to find out what it was and why. I couldn't see my own hand on the other side of it. I put it right up in front of my face, reached through from the back and tried to touch my nose. I couldn't do it. I reached so deep that without the gawk there, my arm would have been halfway through my head . . ."

"Objection!" Amery Heater said. "All this has nothing to do with the fact . . ."

"My client," Justin said, "is giving the incidents leading up to the alleged murder."

"Overruled," the judge said.

MALONEY said, "Thanks. I decided that my arm had to be someplace when I stuffed it through the gawk. And it wasn't in this dimension. Maybe not even in this time. But it had to be someplace. That meant that I had to find out what was on the other side of the gawk. I could use touch, sight. Maybe I could climb through. It intrigued me, you might say.

"I started with touch. I put my hand through, held it in front of me and walked. I walked five feet before my hand rammed up against something. I felt it. It seemed to be a smooth wall. There wasn't such a wall in my cellar.

"There has to be some caution in science. I didn't stuff my head through. I couldn't risk it. I had the hunch there might be something unfriendly on the other side of the gawk. I turned the thing around and stuck my hand through from the other side. No wall. There was a terrific pain. I yanked my hand back. A lot of little bloodvessels near the surface had broken. I dropped the gawk and jumped around for a while. Found out I had a bad case of frostbite. The broken bloodvessels indicated that I had stuffed my hand into a vacuum. Frostbite in a fraction of a second indicated nearly absolute zero. It seemed that maybe I had put my hand

into space. It made me glad it had been my hand instead of my head.

"I propped the thing up on my bench and shoved lots of things through, holding them a while and bringing them back out. Made a lot of notes on the effect of absolute zero on various materials.

"By that time I was bushed. I went up to bed. Next day I had some coffee and then built myself a little periscope. Shoved it through. Couldn't see a thing. I switched the gawk, tested with a thermometer, put my hand through. Warm enough. But the periscope didn't show me a thing. I wondered if maybe something happened to light rays when they went through that blackness. Turns out that I was right.

"By about noon I had found out another thing about it. Every time I turned it around I was able to reach through into a separate and distinct environment. I tested that with the thermometer. One of the environments I tested slammed the mercury right out through the top of the glass and broke the glass and burned my hand. I was glad I hadn't hit that one the first time. It would have burned my hand off at the wrist.

"I began to keep a journal of each turn of the gawk, and what seemed to be on the other side of it. I rigged up a jig on my work bench and began to grope through the gawk with my fireplace tongs.

"Once I jabbed something that seemed to be soft and alive. Those tongs were snatched right through the gawk. Completely gone. It gave me the shudders, believe me. If it had been my hand instead of the tongs, I wouldn't be here. I have a hunch that whatever snatched those tongs would have been glad to eat me.

"I rigged up some grappling hooks and went to work. Couldn't get anything. I put a lead weight on some cord and lowered it through. Had some grease on the end of the weight. When the cord slacked off, I pulled it back up. There was fine yellow sand on the bottom of the weight. And I had lowered it thirty-eight feet before I hit sand.

"On try number two hundred and eight, I brought an object back through the gawk. Justy has it right there in his bag. Show it to the people, Justy."

Justin looked annoyed at the informal request, but he unstrapped the bag and took out an object. He passed it up to the judge who looked at it with great interest. Then it was passed through the jury. It ended up on the table in front of the bench, tagged as an exhibit.

"You can see, folks, that such an object didn't come out of our civilization."

"Objection!" Heater yelled. "The defendant could have made it."

"Hush up!" the judge said.

"Thanks. As you can see that object is a big crystal. That thing in the crystal is a golden scorpion, about five times life size. The corner is sawed off there because Jim Finch sawed it off. You notice that he sawed off a big enough piece to get a hunk of the scorpion's leg. Jim told me that leg was solid gold. That whole bug is solid gold. I guess it was an ornament in some other civilization.

"Now that gets me around to Jim Finch. As you all know, Jim retired from the jewelry business about five years ago. Jim was a pretty sharp trader. You know how he parlayed his savings across the board so that he owned a little hunk of just about everything in town. He was always after me to let him in on my next gimmick. I guess those royalty checks made his mouth water. We weren't what you'd call friends. I passed the time of day with him, but he wasn't a friendly man.

"Anyway, when I grabbed this bug out of the gawk, I thought of Jim Finch. I wanted to know if such a thing could be made by a jeweler. Jim was home and his eyes popped when he saw it. You know how he kept that little shop in his garage and made presents for people? Well, he cut off a section with a saw. Then he said that he'd never seen anything like it and he didn't know how on earth it was put together. I told him that it probably wasn't put together on earth. That teased him a little and he kept after me until I told him the whole story. He didn't believe it. That made me mad. I took him over into my cellar and showed him a few things. I set the gawk between two boxes so it was parallel to the floor, then dropped my grapples down into it. In about three minutes I caught something and brought it up. It seemed to be squirming."

MALONEY drew a deep breath.

"That made me a shade cautious. I brought it up slow. The head of the thing came out. It was like a small bear—but more like a bear that had been made into a rug. Flat like a leech, and instead of front

legs it just seemed to have a million little sucker disks around the flat edge. It screamed so hard, with such a high note, that it hurt my ears. I dropped it back through.

"When I looked around, old Jim was backed up against the cellar wall, mumbling. Then he got down on his hands and knees and patted the floor under the gawk. He kept right on mumbling. Pretty soon he asked me how that bear-leech and that golden bug could be in the same place. I explained how I had switched the gawk. We played around for a while and then came up with a bunch of stones. Jim handled them, and his eyes started to pop out again. He began to shake. He told me that one of the stones was an uncut ruby. You couldn't prove it by me. It would've made you sick to see the way old Jim started to drool. He talked so fast I could hardly understand him. Finally I got the drift. He wanted us to go in business and rig up some big machinery so we could dig through the gawk and come back with all kinds of things. He wanted bushels of rubies and a few tons of gold.

"I told him I wasn't interested. He got so mad he jumped up and down. I told him I was going to fool around with the thing for a while and then I was going to turn it over to some scientific foundation so the boys could go at it in the right way.

"He looked mad enough to kill me. He told me we could have castle and cars and yachts and a million bucks each. I told him that the money was coming in faster than I could spend it already and all I wanted was to stay in my cellar and tinker.

"I told him that I guessed the atomic explosion had dislocated something, and the end product belonged to science. I also told him very politely to get the devil home and stop bothering me.

"He did, but he sure hated to leave. Well, by the morning of the tenth, I had pretty well worn myself out. I was bushed and jittery from no sleep. I had made twenty spins in a row without getting anything, and I had begun to think I had run out of new worlds on the other side of the gawk.

"Like a darn fool, I yanked it off the jig, took it like a hoop and scaled it across the cellar. It went high, then dropped lightly, spinning.

"And right there in my cellar was this beautiful red-head. She was dressed in a shiny silver thing. Justy's got that silver thing in his bag. Show it to the people. You can see that it's made out of some sort of metal mesh, but it isn't cold like metal would be. It seems to hold heat and radiate it."

The metal garment was duly passed around. Everybody felt of it, exclaimed over it. This was better than a movie. Maloney could see from Amery Heater's face that the man wanted to claim the metal garment was also made in the Maloney cellar.

Bill winked at him. Amery Heater flushed a dull red.

"Well, she stood there, right in the middle of the gawk which was flat against the floor. She had a dazed look on her face. I asked her where she had come from. She gave me a blank look and a stream of her own language. She seemed mad about something. And pretty upset.

"Now what I should have done was pick up that gawk and lift it back up over her head. That would have put her back in her own world. But she stepped out of it, and like a darn fool, I stood and held it and spun it, nervous like. In spinning it, I spun her own world off into some mathematical equation I couldn't figure.

"It was by the worst or the best kind of luck, depending on how you look at it, that I made a ringer on her when I tossed the gawk across the cellar. Her makeup startled me a little. No lipstick. Tiny crimson beads on the end of each eyelash. Tiny emerald green triangles painted on each tooth in some sort of enamel. Nicely centered. Her hairdo wasn't any wackier than some you see every day.

"Well, she saw the gawk in my hands and she wasn't dumb at all. She came at me, her lips trembling, her eyes pleading, and tried to step into it. I shook my head, hard, and pushed her back and set it back in the jig. I shoved a steel rod through, holding it in asbestos mittens. The heat beyond the blackness turned the whole rod cherry red in seconds. I shoved it on through the rest of the way, then showed her the darkened mitten. She was quick. She got the most horrified look on her face.

"Then she ran upstairs, thinking it was some sort of joke, I guess. I noticed that she slammed right into the door, as though she expected it to open for her. By the time I got to her, she had figured out the knob. She went down the walk toward the gate.

"That's when nosey Anita must have seen her. I shouted and she turned around and

the tears were running right down her face. I made soothing noises and she let me lead her back into the house. I've never seen a prettier girl or one stacked any . . . I mean her skin is translucent, sort of. Her eyes are enormous. And her hair is a shade of red that you never see.

"She had no place to go and she was my responsibility. I certainly didn't feel like turning her over to the welfare people. I fixed her up a place to sleep in my spare room and I had to show her everything. How to turn on a faucet. How to turn the lights off and on.

"She didn't do anything except cry for four days. I gave her food that she didn't eat. She was a mess. Worried me sick. I didn't have any idea how to find her world again. No idea at all. Of course, I could have popped her into any old world, but it didn't seem right.

"On the fourth day I came up out of the cellar and found her sitting in a chair looking at a copy of See Magazine. She seemed very much interested in the pictures of the women. She looked up at me and smiled. That was the day I went into town and came back with a mess of clothes for her. I had to show her how a zipper worked, and how to button a button."

HE LOOKED as if that might have been fun.

"After she got all dressed up, she smiled some more and that evening she ate well. I kept pointing to things and saying the right name for them.

"I tell you, once she heard the name for something, she didn't forget it. It stayed right with her. Nouns were easy. The other words were tough. About ten that night I finally caught her name. It was Rejapachalandakeena. She seemed to like to have me call her Keena. The first sentence she said was, 'Where is Keena?'

"That is one tough question. Where is here and now? Where is this world, anyway? On what side of what dimension? In which end of space? On what twisted convolution of the time stream? What good is it to say 'This is the world'. It just happens to be our world. Now I know that there are plenty of others.

"Writing came tougher for her than the sounds of the words. She showed me her writing. She took a piece of paper, held the pencil pointing straight up and put the paper on top of the rug. Then she worked that pencil like a pneumatic hammer, starting at the top right corner and going down the page. I couldn't figure it until she read it over, and made a correction by sticking in one extra hole in the paper. I saw then that the pattern of holes was very precise—like notes on a sheet of music.

"She went through the grade school readers like a flash. I was buying her some arithmetic books one day, and when I got back she said, 'Man here while Billy gone.' She was calling me Billy. 'Keena hide,' she said.

"Well, the only thing missing was the gawk, and with it, Keena's chance to make a return to her own people. I thought immediately of Jim Finch. I ran over and pounded on his door. He undid the chain so he could talk to me through a five inch crack, but I couldn't get in. I asked him if he had stolen the little item. He told me that I'd better run to the police and tell them exactly what it was that I had lost, and then I could tell the police exactly how I got it. I could tell by the look of naked triumph in his eyes that he had it. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

"Keena's English improved by leaps and bounds and pretty soon she was dipping into my texts on chemistry and physics. She seemed puzzled. She told me that we were like her people a few thousand years back. Primitives. She told me a lot about her world. No cities. The houses are far apart. No work. Everyone is assigned to a certain cultural pursuit, depending on basic ability. She was a designer. In order to train herself, she had had to learn the composition of all fabricated materials used in her world.

"I took notes while she talked. When I get out of this jam, I'm going to revolutionize the plastics industry. She seemed bright enough to be able to take in the story of how she suddenly appeared in my cellar. I gave it to her slow and easy.

"When I was through, she sat very still for a long time. Then she told me that some of the most brilliant men of her world had long ago found methods of seeing into other worlds beyond their own. They had borrowed things from worlds more advanced than their own, and had thus been able to avoid mistakes in the administration of their own world. She told me that it was impossible that her departure should go unnoticed. She said that probably at the moment of her

disappearance, all the resources of a great people were being concentrated on that spot where she had been standing talking to some friends. She told me that some trace of the method would be found and that they would then scan this world, locate her and take her back.

"I asked her if it would be easier if we had the gawk, and she said that it wasn't necessary, and that if it was, she would merely go next door and see Jim Finch face to face. She said she had a way, once she looked into his eyes, of taking over the control of his involuntary muscles and stopping his heartbeat.

"I gasped, and she smiled sweetly and said that she had very nearly done it to me when I had kept her from climbing back through the gawk. She said that everybody in her world knew how to do that. She also said that most adults knew how to create, out of imagination images that would respond to physical tests. To prove it she stared at the table. In a few seconds a little black box slowly appeared out of misty nothingness. She told me to look at it. I picked it up. It was latched. I opened it. Her picture smiled out at me. She was standing before the entrance of a white castle that seemed to reach to the clouds.

"Suddenly it was gone. She explained that when she stopped thinking of it, it naturally disappeared, because that was what had caused it. Her thinking. I asked her why she didn't think up a doorway to her own world and then step through it while she was still thinking about it. She said that she could only think up things by starting with their basic physical properties and working up from there, like a potter starts with clay.

"So I stopped heckling Jim Finch at about that time. I was sorry, because I wanted the gawk back. Best toy I'd ever had. Once I got a look in Jim's garage window. He'd forgot to pull the shade down all the way. He had the gawk rigged up on a stand, and had a big arm, like the bucket on a steam shovel rigged up, only just big enough to fit through the hoop. He wasn't working it when I saw him. He was digging up the concrete in the corner of his cellar. He was using a pick and he had a shovel handy. He was pale as death. I saw then that he had a human arm in there on the floor and blood all over. The bucket was rigged with jagged teeth. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what Jim had done.

"Some poor innocent character in one of those other worlds had had a massive contraption come out of nowhere and chaw his arm off. I thought of going to the police, and then I thought of how easy it would be for Jim Finch to get me stuck away in a padded cell, while he stayed on the outside, all set to pull more arms off more people."

HEATER glanced uneasily at the jury. They were drinking it in.

"I told Keena about it and she smiled. She told me that Jim was digging into many worlds and that some of them were pretty advanced. I gradually got the idea that old Jim was engaging in as healthy an occupation as a small boy climbing between the bars and tickling the tigers. I began to worry about old Jim a little. You all know about that couple of bushels of precious stones that were found in his house. That's what made him tickle the tigers. But the cops didn't find that arm. I guess that after he got the hole dug, Jim got over his panic and realized that all he had to do was switch the gawk around and toss the arm through. Best place for old razor blades I ever heard of.

"Well, as May turned into June and June went by, Keena got more and more confident of her eventual rescue. As I learned more about her world, I got confident of it too. In a few thousand years we may be as bright as those people. I hope we are. No wars, no disease.

"And the longer she stayed with me, the more upset I got about her leaving me. But it was what she wanted. I guess it's what I'd want, if somebody shoved me back a thousand years B.C. I'd want to get home, but quick.

"On the tenth of July, I got a phone call from Jim Finch. His voice was all quavery like a little old lady. He said, 'Maloney, I want to give that thing back to you. Right away.' Anything Jim Finch gave anybody was a spavined gift horse. I guessed that the gobblies were after him like Keena had hinted.

"So I just laughed at him. Maybe I laughed to cover up the fact that I was a little scared, too. What if some world he messed with dropped a future type atomic bomb back through the gawk into his lap? I told him to burn it up if he was tired of it.

"I didn't know Jim could cuss like that. He said that it wouldn't burn and he couldn't break it or destroy it anyway. He said that he was coming out and throw it across the hedge into my yard right away.

"As I got to my front door, he came running out of his house. He carried the thing like it was going to blow up.

"Just as he got to the hedge, I saw a misty circle in the air over his head. Only it was about ten feet across. A pair of dark blue shiny pliers with jaws as big as the judge's desk there swooped down and caught him by the head. The jaws snapped shut so hard that I could hear sort of a thick, wet, popping sound as all the bones in old Jim's head gave way all at once.

"He dropped the gawk and hung limp in those closed jaws for a moment, then he was yanked up through that misty circle into nothingness. Gone. Right before my eyes. The misty circle drifted down to grass level, and then faded away. The gawk faded right away with it. You know what it made me think of? Of a picnic where you're trying to eat and a bug gets on your arm and bothers you. You pinch it between your thumb and forefinger, roll it once and throw it away. Old Jim was just about as important to those blue steel jaws as a hungry red ant is to you or me. You could call those gems he got crumbs, I guess.

"I was just getting over being sick in my own front yard when Timmy came running over, took one look at the blood and ran back. The police came next. That's all there is to tell. Keena is still around and Justy will bring her in to testify tomorrow."

Bill Maloney yawned and smiled at the jury.

Amery Heater got up, stuck his thumbs inside his belt and walked slowly and heavily over to Bill.

He stared into Bill's smiling face for ten long seconds. Bill shuffled his feet and began to look uncomfortable.

In a low bitter tone, Amery Heater said, "Gawks! Golden scorpions! Tangential worlds! Blue jaws!" He sighed heavily, pointed to the jury and said, "Those are intelligent people, Maloney. No questions!"

The judge had to pound with his gavel to quiet the court. As soon as the room was quiet, he called an adjournment until ten the following morning.

When Bill Maloney was brought out of his cell into court the next morning, the jurors gave each other wise looks. It was obvious that the young man had spent a bad night. There were puffy areas under his eyes. He scuffed his heels as he walked, sat down heavily and buried his face in his hands. They wondered why his shoulders seemed to shake.

Justin Marks looked just as bad. Or worse.

Bill was sunk in a dull lethargy, in an apathy so deep that he didn't know where he was, and cared less.

Justin Marks stood up and said, "Your Honor, we request an adjournment of the case for twenty-four hours."

"For what reason?"

"Your Honor, I intended to call the woman known as Keena to the stand this morning. She was in a room at the Hotel Hollyfield. Last night she went up to her room at eleven after I talked with her in the lounge. She hasn't been seen since. Her room is empty. All her possessions are there, but she is gone. I would like time to locate her, your Honor."

The judge looked extremely disappointed. He pursed his lips and said, in a sweet tone, "You are sure that such a woman actually exists, counsellor?"

Justin Marks turned pale and Amery Heater chuckled.

"Of course, your Honor! Why, only last night . . ."

"Her people came and got her," Bill Maloney said heavily. He didn't look up. The jury shifted restlessly. They had expected to be entertained by a gorgeous redhead. Without her testimony, the story related by Maloney seemed even more absurd than it had seemed when they had heard it. Of course, it would be a shame to electrocute a nice clean young man like that, but really you can't have people going about killing their neighbors and then concocting such a fantasy about it . . .

"What's that?" the judge asked suddenly.

IT BEGAN as a hum, so low as to be more of a vibration than a sound. A throb that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth. Slowly it increased in pitch and in violence, and if the judge had any more to say on the subject, no one heard him. He appeared to be trying to beat the top of his desk in with the gavel. But the noise couldn't be heard.

Slowly climbing up the audible range, it

filled the court. As it passed the index of vibration of the windows, they shattered, but the falling glass couldn't be heard. A man who had been wearing glasses stared through empty frames.

The sound passed beyond the upper limits of the human ear, became hypersonic, and every person in the courtroom was suddenly afflicted with a blinding headache.

It stopped as abruptly as a scream in the night.

For a moment there was a misty arch in the solid wall. Beyond it was the startling vagueness of a line of blue hills. Hills that didn't belong there.

She came quickly through the arch. It faded. She was not tall, but gave the impression of tallness. Her hair was the startling red of port wine, her skin so translucent as to seem faintly bluish. Her eyes were halfway between sherry and honey. Tiny crimson beads were on the tip of each eyelash. Her warm full lips were parted, and they could all see the little green enameled triangles on her white teeth. Her single garment was like the silver metallic garment they had touched. But it was golden. Without any apparent means of support, it clung to her lovely body, following each line and curve.

She looked around the court. Maloney's eyes were warm blue fire. "Keena!" he gasped. She ran to him, threw herself on him, her arms around his neck, her face hidden in the line of jaw, throat and shoulder. He murmured things to her that the jury strained to hear.

Amery Heater, feeling his case fade away, was the first to recover.

"Hypnotism!" he roared.

It took the judge a full minute of steady pounding to silence the spectators. "One more disturbance like this, and I'll clear the court," he said.

Maloney had come to life. She sat on his lap and they could hear her say, "What are they trying to do to you?"

He smiled peacefully. "They want to kill me, honey. They say I killed Jim Finch."

She turned and her eyes shriveled the jury and the judge.

"Stupid!" she hissed.

There was a little difficulty swearing her in. Justin Marks, his confidence regained, thoroughly astonished at finding that Bill Maloney had been telling the truth all along, questioned Keena masterfully. She backed up Maloney's story in every particular. Maloney couldn't keep his eyes off her. Her accent was odd, and her voice had a peculiar husky and yet liquid quality.

Justin Marks knuckled his mustache proudly, bowed to Amery Heater and said, "Do you wish to cross-examine?"

Heater nodded, stood up, and walked slowly over. He gave Keena a long and careful look. "Young woman, I congratulate you on your acting ability. Where did you get your training? Surely you've been on the stage."

"Stage?"

"Oh, come now! All this has been very interesting, but now we must discard this dream world and get down to facts. What is your real name?"

"Rejapachalandakeena."

Heater sighed heavily. "I see that you are determined to maintain your silly little fiction. That entrance of yours was somehow engineered by the defendant, I am sure." He turned and smiled at the jury—the smile of a fellow conspirator.

"Miss So-and-so, the defense has all been based on the idea that you come from some other world, or some hidden corner of time, or out of the woodwork. I think that what you had better do is just prove to us that you do come from some other world." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Just do one or two things for us that we common mortals can't do, please."

Keena frowned, propped her chin on her fist. After a few moments she said, "I do not know completely what you are able to do. Many primitive peoples have learned through a sort of intuition. Am I right in thinking that those people behind that little fence are the ones who decide whether my Billy is to be killed?"

"Correct."

She turned and stared at the jury for a long time. Her eyes passed from face to face, slowly. The jurors were oddly uncomfortable.

She said, "It is very odd. That woman in the second row. The second one from the left. It is odd that she should be there. Not very long ago she gave a poison, some sort of vegetable base poison, to her husband. He was sick for a long time and he died. Is that not against your silly laws?"

The woman in question turned pale green, put her hands to her throat, rolled her eyes up and slid quietly off the chair. No one

made a move to help her. All eyes were on Keena.

Some woman back in the courtroom said shrilly, "I knew there was something funny about the way Dave died! I knew it! Arrest Mrs. Watson immediately!"

Keena's eyes turned toward the woman who had spoken. The woman sat down suddenly.

Keena said, "This man you call Dave. His wife killed him because of you. I can read that in your eyes."

Amery Heater chuckled. "A very good trick, but pure imagination. I rather guess you have been prepared for this situation, and my opponent has briefed you on what to do should I call on you in this way."

Keena's eyes flashed. She said, "You are a most offensive person."

She stared steadily at Amery Heater. He began to sweat. Suddenly he screamed and began to dance about. Smoke poured from his pockets. Blistering his fingers, he threw pocketknife, change, moneyclip on the floor. They glowed dull red, and the smell of scorching wood filled the air.

A wisp of smoke rose from his tie clip, and he tore that off, sucking his blistered fingers. The belt buckle was next. By then the silver coins had melted against the wooden floor. But there was one last thing he had to remove. His shoes. The eyelets were metal. They began to burn the leather.

At last, panting and moaning he stood, surrounded by the cherry red pieces of metal on the floor.

Keena smiled and said softly, "Ah, you have no more metal on you. Would you like to have further proof?"

Amery Heater swallowed hard. He looked up at the open-mouthed judge. He glanced at the jury.

"The prosecution withdraws," he said hoarsely.

The judge managed to close his mouth.

"Case dismissed," he said. "Young woman, I suggest you go back wherever you came from."

She smiled blandly up at him. "Oh, no! I can't go back. I went back once and found that my world was very empty. They laughed at my new clothes. I said I wanted Billy. They said they would transport him to my world. But Billy wouldn't be happy there. So I came back."

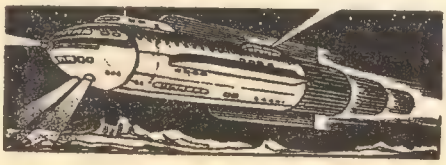
Maloney stood up, yawned and stretched. He smiled at the jury. Two men were helping the woman back up into her chair. She was still green.

He winked at Keena and said, "Come on home, honey."

They walked down the aisle together and out the golden oak doors. Nobody made a sound, or a move to stop them.

Anita Hempflet, extremely conscious of the fact that the man who had left her waiting at the altar thirty-one years before was buried just beyond the corn hills in her vegetable garden, forced her razor lips into a broad smile, beamed around at the people sitting near her and said, in her high, sharp voice:

"Well! That girl is going to make a lovely neighbor! If you folks will excuse me, I'm going to take her over some fresh strawberry preserves."



A fallen satellite of Venus lures three hunted beings to the island of smiling death in THE MOON THAT VANISHED, featured novelet by Leigh Brackett in the gala 180-page October issue of our companion magazine—

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THE

CHAPTER I

Back Through the Past

THE three men had a portentous air, as though they faced a decision of great importance. The tallest of them was obviously uneasy.

"But the dogs died, you know." he objected suddenly.

Outside the countryside was shrouded in thick fog, through which the peculiar whistle of the twenty-second century air-trains, following invisible lines of Y-rays, came faintly to the ear. Inside the laboratory, concealed lights, reflected from the smooth metal of the

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BY FESTUS PRAGNELL

Through a miraculous twenty-second century experiment, a young man traces his origins back to a pre-terran world!

ISOTOPE MEN

ceiling, gave a perfect imitation of diffused daylight.

A man of a former age might have taken these men to be three very masculine women. They were enveloped, except for their heads, hands and feet, in one-piece overalls. Their cheeks were innocent of any trace of hair. The hormone that sets the beard growing at puberty had been neutralized in their blood in accordance with the universal custom. Thus had the male sex freed itself of the daily trouble and pain of shaving.

The youngest man, an athletic young fellow of twenty-four, laughed and slapped the tall one on the back. "You seem nervous, Armstrong," he said. "I know the dogs died when we tried the machine on them, but still, I may not. A human being has a stronger brain than a dog has.

"I am confident that I can go under the nerve-stilling machine, practically to a stage of death, and still find the power to recover. If I do not, well, there have been many martyrs to science for less important causes than ours."

"You have the right spirit, my son," said the middle-aged, thick-set man whose overalls were very badly soiled. "There is a racial mind, of that I am confident—and when your brain has been deprived of nearly all outside stimulation, the contents of the racial mind will come to the top.

"How do the birds know when and where to migrate or how to build nests, if they have not inherited memories subconsciously guiding them? Why do we fear certain things instinctively?

"Though I admit feeling that I would rather some one else faced the danger, Christopher, yet we must have a competent, scientific witness, one who has the interests of my investigation at heart. If you are ready, step into the chair and I will commence dulling your conscious mind so that the subconscious can take its place."

It was with more trepidation than he cared to admit that Christopher sat in the chair with the nerve-soothing machine at its back and, while his father adjusted the leather cap over his head, took what might be his last look round the laboratory.

His father's theory was that experience is never lost, but that the memories of all our ancestors are stored in our brains if we can but find them. Instinct, which plays a much more important part than reason in our lives, according to the scientist, was but the sum of these racial memories.

A pad was adjusted to Christopher's neck and, as the combined magnetic field and low temperature began to impede and soften the electro-chemical impulses passing along the microscopic nerve-fibers of his spine, his body seemed to grow cold and distant. More pads were placed at his temples to affect his optic nerves and all became dark. Other pads were placed over his ears and nose. Only the sense of taste remained.

"He's off all right," muttered Armstrong.

"Yes," said the father, "if all is as I hope and believe, the individual, Christopher Barlem, is for a while dead. Only that part of his mind survives that is the common property of the race. He may be living through my life as it was before I begot him or he may be gazing upon scenes our ancestors saw hundreds of thousands of years ago."

NOW the young man's features assumed a rigid immobility. Barlem altered the adjustments. A slight pucker appeared between the recumbent man's eyebrows and he shivered. To Armstrong it seemed like producing movements in a corpse and he wished he had not agreed to the experiment.

"But," he objected, "if we have stopped the sensory impulses going to the brain, haven't we also checked the motor impulses coming from it? Perhaps we have interfered too rapidly with those that prevent the heart beating."

"I think we have," said the father, "the pulse is very rapid."

A change was coming over the face of the sleeper, a look of horror gradually taking possession of it as though he gazed upon scenes of unimaginable terror. That look became fixed as though Christopher had died in a state of great fear.

For almost an hour they watched, lifting a heavy, helpless arm from time to time to feel the pulse.

"Quick!" cried Armstrong, suddenly. "The breath has almost stopped."

Barlem snapped off the switch. Very pale, he felt the pulse again. There was only a faint movement. "I was not expecting such a sudden breakdown," he muttered. "Help me carry him."

Together they lifted the body and carried it to a couch where a machine applied artificial respiration. They administered oxygen, adrenalin and other stimulants.

A nervous stimulus, applied to the brain, produced a quiver of an eyelid. "Only a matter of time," announced the father, with a sigh of relief.

At last the body was freed from its encumbrances and the eyes opened, staring blankly about. It was not Christopher Barlem that looked at them but some uncivilized ancestor.

"Look out!" called the father but too late, for the young man sprang straight at Armstrong's throat. Barlem wrenched his son away and secured him to the couch once

more—but not before the beryllium-copper-steel of twenty-second-century dentistry had extensively lacerated Armstrong's neck.

"His conscious mind is not yet in control," explained Barlem, watching the frantic struggles of his son. "Do you notice," he asked, "how the left arm hangs idle? The nerves of that arm are dead."

"Will it recover?"

"I think so. The healthy nerves will grow again in the sheaths of the dead fibers, like a plant sending out new roots. We will keep the muscles strong by electrical treatment and, in time, the limb will be as sound as ever. Help me get his overalls off and put him to bed. Tomorrow, if he is strong enough, we shall hear what he has to say of his sojourn in the past."

However, a week passed before the patient had sufficiently recovered and the two men met at his bedside.

The room was a large one with wide open windows looking out on grass terraces, pools with fountains and lines of trees stretching away to the horizon. Occasionally a bee buzzed in enquiringly. Christopher sat propped up in bed, rather pale and thin and bearing one arm in a sling.

* * *

My first sensations while under the influence of the ray were the gradual dimming of the light, the fading away of sounds, the sense of receding to an infinite distance. A wave of undreamed-of comfort filled the universe. All necessity for effort, the struggle and striving that are life, was gone. The distant beating of my heart was like the thumping of a powerful machine to which I listened without interest.

All this was usual, but then came, through this sea of ease that was akin to death, a disturbing influence, a throb of emotion, a pulse of indefinable fear. All will was gone, fear filled my mind, meeting no resistance. Fear, and fear alone, existed.

It was the bed-rock of existence, that ultimate terror of dissolution that never leaves us—that provides the motive force of life—the power that keeps us striving to live through the greatest pain, illness or despair—the spur that never ceases its driving while life beats in our bodies. I was experiencing it now in its final simplicity, an awful force racking my mind, agonizing because of my inability to make any response.

SCIENTIFICTION HALL OF FAME STORY

SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

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IT CAME in throbs, stronger and stronger. At first it was formless, then it began to assume definite shapes, to become terror of this or of that. Fear of destruction merged inextricably into terror of the unknown, into fear of new experiences. At the same time I seemed to possess many different personalities, to pass from being one person to being another.

One moment I was a savage crouching in a jungle at night, possessed with terror compounded of fear of wild beasts and of imagined things of the dark. The next, I was a girl trembling at the dawning prospect of womanhood. Then I was a savage child in a tree and the space below was like a maw waiting to devour me.

I shared the thoughts of these and many more and the feelings of all were the same—a terror of dissolution, a terror of the unknown, a passionate desire to live and to propagate life. Such is the mental motive power constantly maintained by the racial mind, much in the same way as the heart pumps blood through the body.

My mind flitted from individual to individual like a butterfly from flower to flower. As I lighted on each person I passed his early life in instantaneous comprehensive review, thought the thoughts and felt the feelings of that individual, was that individual, for an indefinable space of time. It was like living a multitude of lives in a series of vivid flashes—and all the time it was nothing but a collection of extremely detailed memories.

None of them had any beginning or end

for, of course, none of us is conscious of any beginning to his life or can transmit a memory of death. I was a priest in a temple and fled thence with a woman. I was a worshipper in that same temple and helped to hunt and to slay that same priest. I fled from cave-bears. I hunted sabre-toothed tigers. I was a soldier in Nebuchadnezzar's army.

I was a scientist with knowledge far surpassing what I possess in this life. I traveled in antiquated airships and submarines. I knew the secret of atomic power; I, yes—I, traveled in space-ships. Whether my visions all related to the past or whether some of them belonged to the future, the fact remains that I traveled in space-ships.

It was like a series of illuminated pictures, some bright, some faint. Where the intelligence of the subject was strongest, there I had the clearest, most detailed stories. Where it was weak there was little more than a welter of emotions. And, oddly enough, the lives of some obscure men and women were clearer than those of brilliant scientists and authors, while many kings and queens made hardly any impression on the stream.

Clear above them all stands out the story of a simple boy. It has made this lasting impression, I think, because of the vividness of his perceptions and because of the frightful cataclysm through which he lived while still of an impressionable age.

That boy, although I did not realize it until a little while ago, did not live on Earth, but on another planet. This planet was farther from the sun than we are and its nearest neighbors in space, apart from its only satellite, were Jupiter and Mars.

It was a peaceful, pleasant world, or so it seemed to a child, and was the only inhabited planet in the Solar System—inhabited, that is to say, by humanity. On earth Mankind had not yet risen to challenge the sovereignty of the beasts.

He or I (for he seemed to be myself) had no brothers or sisters, but lived with my father. I remember very little of my mother. She died when I was very young. We had easy lives, for nearly all necessity for work had been banished by scientists of bygone ages.

Little remained of that science now for, having solved nearly all human problems, it had fallen into disuse. There was a library containing the knowledge of the ancients, but none now ever passed the electronic dust-barriers at the doors or threaded the coils of profound wisdom through the idle reading machines.

What education there was was conducted by tutors. Myself and eleven companions of both sexes were in the care of one of these, Parmel, a gentle, white-haired man who spent most of his time playing games with us.

CHAPTER II

Parmel's Secret

OUR years were very long, but I think I was of an age corresponding to about seventeen Earth years on the day when I approached Parmel, as he sat half asleep in the garden. I began to ask him questions, for my mind was full of curiosity.

It was a perfect day, warm and bright, with small white clouds floating leisurely across the sky. But so accustomed were we to perfect weather in a world where the winds and temperature were controlled by humanity that we did not notice its beauty. The sun shone, but it was not a conspicuous object among the half-dozen artificial suns that competed with it—mechanical bodies that patiently provided us with light and heat and seldom required attention.

Parmel sat among clumps of tall feathery grasses on an upholstered garden seat equipped with a rock shelter under which it slid automatically, out of the dew and showers of the night. Before him was a shallow pool in which little creatures rather like frogs were jumping and swimming about.

"They tell me, Parmel," I began, sitting beside him, "that when I want to know anything I should ask you."

"That is so, Hasteen," he replied, turning his grave, gray eyes on me, "what does my little one wish to know?"

"A few days ago my father took me on a visit to my uncle who lives in the North, and we went to a big building where there was a machine they called a telescope. Looking into the eyepiece of this machine, I saw a rough grey ball with black markings.

"The masterpiece of our ancestors," said the attendant, "the sphere that provides our heat, light and power and has made life so easy for us."

"Terrible! I heard father say as he looked at it. What did he mean?"

Parmel looked troubled. "Do not inquire into such things, little one," he said, stroking my hair. "It is not good to be so curious. Let us play with the ball machine."

I pouted. "But Daddy told me to ask you. He said you would tell me!"

He sighed. "Well, if you must know, you shall. See all those little suns sprinkled about the sky, providing us with light and warmth? They were made by men long ages ago. The Moon, which you saw, sends down the power which is transmitted to the little suns and turned by them into light and heat. Now let us play."

I would not play but pondered this explanation in silence.

"But if the moon is cold and dark, as I saw it, how can it send down heat and light?"

"Never did I know a child with so much curiosity," exclaimed Parmel with another sigh. "But that strange man, your father, says your questions are to be answered and answered they shall be and truthfully. The power from the moon is atomic power. Wait one moment." He went into the house, to return carrying a green metal box by its handle.

"This, Hasteen, is the heater that keeps up the hot water supply in my home."

He carried it to a small statue, where he plugged it into two holes cunningly hidden in the mouth of a sculptured fish at the base.

"It is a machine for obtaining atomic power," he exclaimed, removing the case.

I looked at it. It seemed to me merely a device for creating a field of electromagnetic tension between two brass plates. There was nothing for the energy to act on.

"Put your hand into the cup in the middle of it—it is quite cold—and see what you find."

I did so and drew out a small disc of lead, which I examined and returned. Parmel threw the switch, first warning me not to touch the uncovered machine. The leaden disc jumped up to occupy a spot exactly central between the brass plates. Almost immediately it changed into a round ball of suspended molten metal whose heat I could feel on my face and hands. It began to glow dull red, then bright, until it was a ball of intense white fire at which I could not look.

PARMEL switched it off. "These unshielded rays are highly dangerous," he explained, "therefore I stopped the process before the lead had really begun to warm up. That ball will emit heat and light a hundred times as intense as that and continue to do so for years.

"An atom consists of protons and electrons, the protons being units of positive electricity while the electrons are units of negative electricity. All the protons and some of the electrons are contained in the central nucleus of the atom, while the remaining electrons circle round this nucleus much in the same way as the planets travel round the sun.

"Now the electrons are not restricted to one fixed orbit, but each electron has a limited number of definite orbits which it may occupy and it may jump from one to another. When it jumps outwards it absorbs a quantum of energy. When it jumps towards the nucleus it emits an equivalent quantum of energy.

"Many thousands of years ago, when science was at the apex of its power, men discovered the way to release this energy of the atom. An intense magnetic field caused the electrons to drop into smaller orbits, even into the nucleus itself. That was what made that leaden ball so hot.

"Now, when an electron thus fell into the nucleus, the atom changed and became an atom of another element. Three such changes turned lead, which has eighty two planetary electrons, into thalium, which has eighty one, then into mercury, with eighty, then into gold, with seventy nine. Or rather into an isotope of gold—that is to say, into a substance having all the properties of gold except for a greater weight. Isotopes are common in nature.

"The power thus obtained was tremendous. We produced aluminum far heavier than lead and solid oxygen that refused to melt. These unnatural atoms showed a strong tendency to absorb energy and return to more natural forms.

"Elements that changed into others were found to be highly dangerous and the rays formed, where power was produced in bulk, had harmful effects. Therefore, the main production of power was transferred to the Moon, which to this day sends down an invisible beam of energy that, transmitted to our globes, is radiated down again.

"In this way we have made the whole of the globe habitable except the extreme South Pole, instead of merely the equatorial belt,

which is the only area on which the unaided power of the distant sun can support human life.

"The last step was to move the Moon from its orbit, and fix it over the North (magnetic) Pole. This was done to obviate the difficulties of having a moving source of power. When our nearest neighbor in space, massive Jupiter, passed near our planet it caused perturbations in its orbit and that of its satellite."

"The great beam no longer fell on the receiving plants. All of the little suns winked out and millions died of cold before the scientists brought the Moon back into its orbit.

"Such is the tale, Hasteen. I have told you, a child, more than many grown-up persons know. Now let us play."

I agreed, for my mind had acquired as much knowledge as it could digest at one time. We rode on our kolabs, creatures with round yellow bodies and single snaky legs with a pad at the end. They progressed by jumping, and obeyed verbal commands. We made them throw us high in the air and catch us on their powerful tails.

Seeing us enjoying ourselves, the others came to join us and we swam in the lake and played with octopi. A great snake, with beautiful gold, red and blue markings, swam with us. We had never seen its like before but we had no fear, for the last harmful creature on our world had been destroyed long ages before.

THAT night, as I lay on my wonderfully soft bed, I pondered Parmel's words. Next day, at the first opportunity, I faced my tutor with a new question.

"I understand now what the attendant said but why did Father call it a terrible thing?"

I saw that he was profoundly startled. "There is nothing more to tell, child," he said, hastily. But I saw his pallor and the trembling of his hands and knew that he lied.

"I'll tell Father," I cried, stamping my feet in temper.

"Don't be cross with me, Hasteen. There is nothing else."

I raced away from him, knowing that he could not catch me except on his kolab and jumped into my machine amongst the bushes. Pressing the button marked *Home,* I was carried through the air to the lawn before my fathere's house.

Running in, I found him sitting alone in his room, for he had a love of solitude that marked him as slightly abnormal. He ignored my entrance, for he was listening to a mechanical rendering of a song sung by long-dead singers—and I knew he must never be disturbed while thus engaged.

When the music ceased I told him all. "Wonderful son," he said, fondling my brown wavy hair, "you have that desire for knowledge, for lack of which our world is about to perish. I will tell you what Parmel dare not.

"Our planet is divided into two hemispheres, each ruled by tyrants who fear that the acquiring of knowledge by the people might make their positions unsafe. Therefore they have forbidden learning. What I am about to tell you I have learned by secret ways. You must never repeat it, or my life will be forfeit.

"There is a crisis facing our world which our rulers will not allow the people to hear of lest the ineptitude of their government be revealed. The power in the Moon is nearly at an end. For countless generations it has kept our planet warm and fertile. Whereas it was once big enough to be easily seen, and to give us light at night, now it is but a few miles across and visible only in a telescope.

"The power supply is already reduced. The globes are not so bright nor so warm as they were. When it fails altogether the great majority of us must perish, for only at the equator will human life be possible. Already there is bickering between the rival governments over the apportionment of power. Arguments that may end in open warfare at any moment.

"The scheme has been suggested of capturing another heavenly body to be a young and healthy moon for us, of sending our exhausted satellite off into space. But the science that plucked the Moon from its place in the sky was of a distant generation, whose secrets are forgotten or hidden. Such dreams are vain."

It was a thoughtful and rather frightened young man that now listened to his father's words.

"No one knows what can be done," he went on. "We might build ourselves power plants of the earth, as was done in the past. But the people are sunk in sloth and apathy, caring little about the approaching danger, provided that their immediate comforts are not interfered with. None can even acquire

knowledge that might aid us in avoiding our doom—for the autocrats have forbidden any approach to the library that contains the wisdom of the ancients."

I pondered long over all this and my secret desire was to enter the forbidden building and to absorb the knowledge hidden therein. My solo flights—I made many of them—tended always to lead me towards it and I studied the lay of the land.

It was a gray stone building, much corroded by weather, set on a barren mountain, the only approach to which was through the air. In one place the roof had fallen and shelf upon shelf of wire coils stared up, mutely protesting to the sky at this ill-treatment of the fruits of the labor of the ancients.

The jagged hole drew me like a magnet. To enter by any of the doors was, I knew, to be instantly seen on the vision screens at the police offices and the police plane would be there in a few moments. But I thought that the hole worn by the wind and rain afforded a means of entering unobserved. A thousand times, in my dreams, I flew in and found wonderful things inside.

At last, with the intrepidity of youth, I ventured it. Soft as thistledown my little machine sank through and rested on the debris on the floor. With wildly beating heart I stepped out. In thus breaking the orders of authority I was doing something not one in a thousand on our world would have dared.

CHAPTER III

The Forbidden Building

WINDOWS of quartz lighted the rooms and I was glad of this, for I dared not try the lights. Dust and rubble covered everything in this particular room and the frayed wires often broke on their passage through the reading machines—so that I soon decided not to waste time on the works in this room, most of which, I saw from the labels, related to birds and animals.

Pressing the button I found that the machinery for raising the door no longer functioned. This did not delay me long, for, seizing the central handle, I pulled until something snapped and the door went half-way up and jammed. Ducking beneath I found myself in a long dark corridor.

Feeling my way along I found another door and, on my pressing the button, it slid silently upwards. Through the elliptical opening I saw stacks of wire coils and a number of reading machines in as perfect order as if they had been left but yesterday. It was a storehouse of knowledge of the science of chemistry—but of more interest to me was a plan of the building on the wall near the door. The room devoted to atoms and atomic power was on the other side of the corridor, three doors away.

In a few seconds I was there, taking down coils at random and glancing through the titles and the brief summary of the contents on the labels. There was a reading machine near the door and a coil had been placed on the spool and the end threaded through, ready to be heard.

It was as though whoever had been last there, probably generations before, had left it to be seen by the man who followed him. I felt as though a hand from the past, in this dark, silent house of the dead, were guiding me to the switch. Fearfully I glanced around as I furtively examined the coil.

Near the start the wire had been cut and another piece of wire, about a yard long, had been cunningly interpolated. Who would thus disfigure a complete work of science by adding an unauthorized frontispiece? Gingerly I pressed the switch.

Hearing a grunt behind me I spun around—but it was only a protest from the machinery at having its age-long rest disturbed. After that it worked without a hitch. Marvelous were the machines of the ancients.

The screen lit up, but no picture showed thereon. Only a voice came from the sounding-board—a whispering voice, dry and hoarse, as though the speaker, even as I, went in fear of discovery.

"To all genuine seekers after knowledge, if any such be left upon Earth. Here, sooner or later, must you come, perhaps secretly, as I have come, perhaps openly in some wiser day. God grant that it be the latter. Only in this way can I leave a message for you that the enemies of the light will not discover and destroy. To you, I say, 'Find the true South Pole of Earth and much that is mystery shall be explained to you.' "

Then the join was reached. A man's face appeared on the screen and another voice began some preliminary remarks on the subject of the work. *Secrets of the Moon* it was

called—a strange title for a scientific work.

A longing for safety came to me. I now regretted my rash enterprise. I tiptoed back to my plane, half expecting to find it gone or a guard mounted over it. But it was as I had left it. Trembling I climbed up in it—nothing in sight from the roof. I pulled the lever and shot rashly upwards.

Immediately I realized my mistake. As I climbed I came into full view of a police plane that had been hidden behind a peak. They could not have seen me come out of the library, but must know that I had been near.

With a half-formed idea that out of sight is out of mind, I raced for home.

Should I tell Father of my escapade? I had great faith in my father, whom I regarded as a comrade and friend. My only punishment would be a word of reproof. Finally, with much fumbling and stammering, I told him all.

"Are you sure you were not seen?" he asked gravely. He had gone very pale.

"Quite sure, Dad," I lied, for my courage had failed when it came to telling him about the police plane.

"I hope not," he said, slowly shaking his head, "if you are found out, the punishment is death."

AT THAT moment the radio showed the red light of an imperative call from police headquarters.

The world seemed to crash about my ears and I cursed that police plane from the bottom of my heart.

Giving me a quick glance of warning Father switched on. The coarse features of the police chief showed on the screen.

"Garlan Pollard," began the official, "the routine examination of the forbidden building was made with W-rays this afternoon, and fresh footmarks were found on the floors. Several doors were open. Your son, Hasteen, was seen leaving the vicinity shortly before. You will deliver him at once to the official plane that is being dispatched to bring him here for examination."

A cold hand closed on my heart. Nothing could be hidden from the searching gaze of the authorities. Mercy was an unknown quantity to these officials.

Not a muscle moved on my father's strong, lean face, every detail of which was visible to the searching eyes of the policeman.

"My son has not been out of my sight since the breakfast hour," he declared.

"You will hand him over to the plane," repeated the voice.

"I will bring him to meet it," replied Father, switching off.

Rising, he beckoned to me to follow and we went in silence to where his plane, *Amphibia,* as he called it, rested in its shelter. I could not blame him for handing me over, for resistance to the authorities was unheard of and escape impossible. But as he started off he gripped my hand in a strong, warm grip, without a glance in my direction.

I felt a fresh wave of confidence in this silent reserved man whose child I was.

The plane, *Amphibia,* was of Father's own design, and had an airtight body shaped like a stout, fat-bellied fish. There were lifting propellers at the top and driving propellers behind. Along the sides were wings shaped like the closed wings of a bird. It could travel at great speed, though not so fast as the police machines, and could go up to the highest limits of the stratosphere. The reason for its name was the fact that, with its lifting vanes idle, it would run along the ground—or, with the wheels folded away, serve as a speedy motorboat. It could even be used as a motor sleigh on the snows of mountain tops or pleasure resorts.

In an incredibly short space of time we were advancing to meet the police plane. "You will hand the prisoner over to us," they barked through our receiving apparatus.

"Coming," said father laconically, guiding the plane with his left hand. Then I saw something that thrilled me with a new fear. His right hand, hidden from prying rays behind a solid block of metal, held a square black object with a handle and a pointer. It was one of the ebonite boxes that could contain an enormous amount of power and I saw that the indicator was set for disintegrator rays.

Even in my fear I realized that father was right. It was better to die in a hopeless fight than to face torture in the hands of the authorities. For his attempt to shield me had inevitably involved him in my fate, particularly as the police had long been seeking an excuse to do away with him.

"Preparing to attach myself alongside," father told them, zooming about with a clumsiness foreign to his usual precise skill. The object of his maneuvers was soon revealed for, directly we were out of sight of

any windows, and therefore temporarily safe from attacking rays, his hand shot out. In an instant the main driving propeller of the police plane was in fragments. The ship fell away, spinning sickeningly.

We shot upwards, zig-zagging in all directions. Below us the crippled ship was righted and feebly tried to follow. Father glanced without a word or change of expression at a hole in our wing, torn there by a ray that must have missed finishing us by inches.

In a few moments we were among the clouds, the first fugitives to escape from the police since the legendary criminals and heroes of the past.

OUR troubles, however, were by no means at an end. While we had disabled the only official plane in active commission in our district, others could be started as soon as the men were got together. A few minutes would suffice to warn other districts of our flight.

We went up to the rarefied air of the highest altitudes, where we were safest, alike from the long infra-red rays that penetrate fog and mist and from short X and Y-rays that penetrate material objects. It was freezingly cold, but we could have our heating apparatus only at half strength or it would serve to pick us out.

"Where are we going, Dad?" I asked, breaking a long silence.

"South Pole," he replied, as though it were next door. He was making for the opposite end of our world in response to the message from the past I had heard in the forbidden building.

We were above the artificial suns, globes over a mile wide, radiant on the underside and black above. One of them turned silently over. Father permitted his first exclamation to escape him, and avoided it as widely as possible. The people below were being deprived of heat and light in an endeavor to find us.

A police plane shot up, searching the sky with great beams. Then my father showed his cunning. He kept between the plane and the light, in the full power of the well-nigh intolerable heat of one of the globes—the one place where we could not be seen. The plane passed on.

Our radio carried to us the messages sent out by the police telling of our flight. Then an urgent public proclamation was broadcast that we ignored until we realized its startling and terrible import. Briefly it stated that the negotiations between the North and the South, concerning the apportionment of power, had broken down. The hemispheres were at war. That meant we had thousands of miles of hostile territory to cross on our way to the pole.

FOR a while it helped us. For the forces of the government were too busily engaged to trouble greatly about us. We ceased dodging about, and made straight for the frontier in a mad attempt to cross it before the great protective screens were properly in action.

Oceans and continents raced by beneath. Crashings and boomings sounded from the east—and, daringly switching on our vision screens, we saw a great town being reduced to dust by an enemy fleet.

Of course both sides would strain every nerve to strike the first blow. Hundreds must have been slain before they even knew they were at war. The long mottled bodies of the planes were like a group of deadly snakes, rushing in to strike a blow, then dashing out again.

Occasionally a lucky shot would catch a raiding vessel before it could escape, but steadily the towns were being destroyed. In the surrounding countryside no human life remained, for the land was bathed in deep, inaudible sound waves that caused certain bones in the skull to vibrate, snap and cut into the brain.

Abruptly the defensive screen of the town broke down. Then a few seconds sufficed to annihilate its inhabitants and the fleet went on to the next town. The Northern fleet was probably carrying out similar operations in the South, for the people of our planet had thoroughly learned the first principle of war, dimly realized by Earth in the little war of 1914-18 and nearly carried to its logical conclusion in the terrific holocaust of 1950-51.

The first principle is that you can do far more damage to an enemy's morale by striking at his helpless civilian population than you can by destroying his army or navy. We execrate our late antagonists for the brutality of the poison gas attacks that wiped out half America in the fall of 1950, but they simply meant that our opponents were the first to realize that war is simply mass murder, the first to carry out mass murder with the greatest possible efficiency.

CHAPTER IV

Stranded!

UP, up we went to the atmospheric ceiling, our atomic heater, now in full reckless blast, making us fairly comfortable. Straight ahead showed a faint pinkish haze that was the five-mile wide electronic barrier of the frontier. My heart fell, for nothing could pass that wall but a fleet with terrific defensive power at its command and prepared to lose a third of its number.

As soon as we entered it we would be shown on the screens of both sides. And we, being a civil plane crossing the frontier against the rules of war, both sides would instantly bathe the whole area with brain-destroying vibrations.

Father set his teeth and tore at that impregnable barrier at his top speed. In earth terms I think it would be about 600 miles an hour. In the dim light reflected from his instrument board I saw his lips were drawn back, and his eyes aglow with insane ferocity.

I knew that the passionate, tempestuous nature of this outwardly quiet man was capable of the most unreasoning acts in fits of ungovernable fury. Rumors that had reached me regarding his sanity recurred and caused me profound anxiety.

Straight ahead glowed that pale pink haze. Father swerved neither to the right nor to the left, but turned slightly upwards. Was it possible to go further up? It was, but only for a while, for our velocity carried us right out of the atmosphere like a fish leaping out of water.

It was an invention of genius, of a wonderfully expert airman, an idea that offered one chance in a thousand of escape. I looked out at the surface of the atmosphere beneath, for I saw that the air does not gradually become more and more attenuated until a vacuum is reached, but at a certain point there comes a definite break, a distinct surface.

Seen from above it was like the faintest possible ghost of a sea, with humps and hollows and slow-moving waves many miles in height. Where we had left it, a huge splash was forming, exactly like a splash in water seen in a slow motion camera.

We were dropping again and I saw that our desperate leap would carry us scarce a quarter of the distance across the barrier. We struck the surface. To my surprise, exceedingly rarefied as that surface was, more tenuous than what often passes for a vacuum on the ground, there was a distinct shock. We darted up again like a flat stone skimming the surface of a lake. The watchers must have been puzzled by the black marks that appeared, momentarily, on their screens.

Again that sea of air rose to meet us; again it dropped away. All the time we were gaining distance. At last we could keep it up no longer, but now the pink haze was behind us and we were met by no death-dealing vibrations. Father's terrific gamble had come off. We were in enemy territory.

He turned to me, his face dripping with perspiration. "Pitch and toss with death," he shouted, slapping my back, "pitch and toss with death. Here, you take the controls for a bit. I've had enough." Switching the heat half off he lay down and went to sleep.

Alone in control of the ship I flew over the enemy soil. I cut down the speed to about 200 miles an hour, for I reasoned that the less power I used the less magnetic disturbance we would cause and the less likely we were to be detected. As much as possible I kept over the oceans.

When I feared that we might be seen I resorted to the trick Father had shown me of skimming the atmosphere. It was an exhilarating sport, but I could not make the prodigious speed we had made in passing the electronic barrier. Many a time I was on the point of calling Father, but I won my way without detection for thousands of miles.

AT last I had to wake him, for a fleet was following and rapidly overhauling us at our utmost speed. He grunted and took over the controls. But we could not equal the speed of those ships and soon we must be overtaken. He realized this, for he cut down our speed and hid behind one of the artificial suns.

This was futile, for soon they would be above, below and all round us. But again I underestimated the resourcefulness of my father. Soon he found what he was looking for, the door in the side of the globe through which entry could be made in the rare event of the internal machinery requiring attention.

In a thrice we were within, nestling among the mechanisms. Here, though the X and Y-rays would peer through the walls, what

would appear to be an extra piece of machinery stood a good chance of escaping detection.

Getting out of our vessel we threaded our way through dynamos, valves, electromagnets and much apparatus whose purpose was a mystery to me. Our disintegrator rays made a slit in the side of the globe, through which we watched the advancing fleet.

A few moments' examination showed it to be composed of ships from the North racing across the enemy country at their utmost speed. In their wake followed a great belt of darkness extending right across the sky—and I thought at first that they fled from some frightful weapon of destruction, some terrible new engine of death.

Then I saw them come upon one of the artificial suns. It splintered and crackled as they focussed their rays on it. The light went out and, as the huge store of energy within was released, it exploded with a blinding flash of light and a terrific detonation. Our own globe was set rocking so that it broke away from its position over the magnetic clamp in the ground below; but gradually the attraction reasserted itself and it came back.

I was thunderstruck at this monstrous act of vandalism. The replacing of one of those globes would, in the inadequate state of our mechanical knowledge, take more than a dozen generations. In the meantime the snow and ice of eternal night would seize in relentless grip the land and seas beneath.

Yet the act was perfectly consistent with the object of the war. The fewer globes either side had, the less power they would require and the more there would be for the other.

It was a fight between the hemispheres for the means of existence and was being waged utterly without mercy.

Probably Southern ships were doing the same in the North and soon a narrow band of people at the naturally temperate equator would be the only survivors. They would be, I reflected bitterly, nearly all soldiers.

While I was thinking thus the fleet was advancing on us and the globe we were in was the next in its path. It now seemed to be by no means the haven of refuge it had been and I thought an explosion, like the one that had shivered the last, would be a very unpleasant thing at close quarters.

Father called sharply and I got into our ship beside him. Together we waited for the enemy fleet to attack.

NOW I noticed a curious fact. I suppose the human mind has a limited capacity for terror and I had been through so much that the limit of fear had been passed. As we sat there, absolutely helpless, with no possible means of escape from the approaching ships, I was not the slightest bit afraid.

I did not fear the speeding vessels nor their blasting rays nor the crashings and flying fragments that would presently make this dim-lit place—silent, save for a low hum that pervaded every corner—into an inferno of twisted metal. I seemed to be a remote, indifferent being, calmly watching these two as they sat there, awaiting death.

Father now made one of his rare long speeches. "Son," he said, "it seems that we are about to journey into the unknown together. But I still have one more plan up my sleeve before we finally give in, one more card for the last trick, though I fear Fate, herself, holds the ace. If it fails, at least death will be swift. Strap yourself in." Of course I paraphrase his remarks.

His words gave me hope, and I was surprised to find that, while I had had no hope I was calm—but when hope returned I was afraid.

With a loud report a large section of the side of the globe blew off. At the same moment Father pulled his lever. Eager as a greyhound the little machine leapt from its resting place straight at the side of the globe. I held my breath for the collision, but the sides were as thin as paper and we tore through with but a slight shock. In the crashing destruction of the globe the little noise we made must have passed unnoticed.

The engine stopped and the plane made a sickening plunge downwards, spinning like a top. I was turned upside down, flung sideways, backwards, to the right, to the left and rendered intolerably sick and giddy.

"The plan has failed!" I thought. I had no means of knowing whether Father was alive or dead. It was impossible for me to get out of my straps and reach the instrument board. The waves of a hungry sea reached up for us and I knew that the impact, at this speed, would smash our machine to splinters.

Unexpected sideway lurches added to my distress. Then I saw that Father was at the instrument board, fighting to check that awful spin. Suddenly the whole world was plunged into darkness, the life-giving globe blew up and the attacking ships, little streaks of vengeful fire in the black sky, passed on to

continue their work of destruction. The fall of our vessel had not been noticed in the rain of fragments from the broken globe.

We struck the water with a splash, and I was startled, for I had not thought it so close.

* * * * *

"You were tired out and you've had a good sleep," said my father's calm voice. I rose from the couch on which he had stretched me and felt my bruises, which I had not been aware of when I received them, but which were very painful now that nature was trying to repair the damage.

In a very pale gray light we floated on a millpond sea, above which there blew not a breath of air. It seemed like the dawn of creation before land rose above the waters, before anything moved. A very distant sun, just above the horizon, gave barely enough light to enable us to see how helpless and alone we were; but provided no heat.

In the opposite direction an aurora borealis, brighter than any I have seen on earth, showed the destination we might reach, if at all, as corpses. It was the South Pole we had foolishly set out for, in response to a probably deceitful voice from the past. Nothing could be there but the ice and snow that had always held the region in undisputed possession.

Father was a man who never gave up, but I saw by his face that a black despair had settled on his heart. I did not need to be told that *Amphibia* would never fly again. Her left wing was gone and the main lifting propeller had broken off in our escape from the globe. The outside temperature was dropping and would soon be at freezing point. In our scant clothing we could not long survive outside of the atomically heated cabin.

He started one of the remaining propellers and sent us bowling along the still water. The remaining wing dragged in the water and caused us to travel in circles, so Father went outside and cut it away.

"Freezing cold out there," he observed on his return, pouring himself out a hot drink.

CHAPTER V

The Isotope Men

WE WERE now able to attain a considerable speed, thanks to our power and to the lightness of our vessel, which nearly lifted itself out of the water. The sun went down, but we took turns at watch, keeping a beam of light pointed ahead.

In the morning we were forcing our way through a thin film of ice. The way we had come showed as a long black path and the ripples of our passage could be followed for nearly a mile.

Gray ghost of day succeeded gray ghost of day. Snow sank softly down, covering the most dreary view that ever was, to the depth of about a foot. And always the cold, bright aurora beckoned us on. The white flakes fell straight in that motionless air as though reverently covering a dead earth in her shroud.

Presently, I thought, the thickening ice-sheet must hold us fast; but when this danger seemed near, Father started a lifting propeller, and we jumped out and sped on our smooth underside over the snow. Nothing like our weird journey would be possible on Earth, but our world was without tides and even the winds, produced by artificially varied temperatures, came no more. So that Nature was extremely kind, save foı the steadily increasing cold.

Days followed each other like pale phantoms, dream days. The sky was ever cloudless, the stars always visible.

At last came the first real incident since we had struck the water. Before us rose a sheer wall of ice. The ice over which we had run, until now was but a few days old; but this was the beginning of the great polar ice-sheet that was as old as many of the rocks of the globe themselves. Beyond the wall the surface was tumbled and broken by the stresses and strains of ages.

My dauntless father found a ravine where once a glacier had flowed and sped up it. We began our much more difficult journey across the tumbled ice, past crevasses and mounds and round sheer cliffs. White-furred animals lay frozen to death. Our speed was much reduced and we used our searchlight day and night.

At last the catastrophe we had avoided by inches a hundred times occurred. I was in charge when a crack appeared ahead that had been imperceptible until we were right upon it. There was no time to turn. I switched on all the available lifting power, but struck the opposite side.

Amphibia dipped her nose and settled into an everlasting resting place. She sank

too deep to allow any hope of melting or blasting her way out. Even my resourceful father could not get her to the surface again.

"Beaten when nearly at our goal," he remarked hopelessly. "If we had but warm clothing we might finish our journey on foot. As it is ten minutes out there would freeze us."

Sunken in apathy, neither of us spoke for hours. At last an idea struck me.

"If we could find one of those dead animals," I ventured, "the skin might provide us with covering."

"The boy has brains," he admitted. "We will go and see."

As we stepped out the bitter intense cold gripped me like a huge hand of ice. Each breath was like a sword plunged into my lungs.

Ploughing through deep snow we found a place where the wall of the crevasse was scalable. We clambered up to survey the desolate landscape. No dead furry body, whose protection we might steal, was visible on the tumbled expanse.

But when we looked to the north, on the opposite side of the crack, we saw something that astonished us. A great oval body, obviously a ship, lay green and gold on the distant ice. At first, I thought it was hallucination. Then I saw that Father, too, was looking that way. I shouted and waved my arms while he, having a better idea, signaled with a light beam from his handpower box. Response was almost immediate. The ship rose gently as a soap-bubble and drifted to us.

If this were rescue coming it would have to be quick to do us any good. Already, a dangerous numbness was creeping over my limbs. Yet who was likely to rescue us? To half the world we were fugitives—to the other half, enemies. Of one thing I was sure—that oval ship was of a pattern never before seen on Earth.

IT CAME to a stop before us, precariously tilted on the rough ground. Through round windows, men of calm, impassive features looked at us, and their clothing was simple but exceedingly strange, like the clothes worn by people in pictures of long ago.

A round door opened, and a deep voice uttered the one word, "Enter!" It was probably a trap, but death would claim us very soon now if we remained where we were. We had no choice. I stepped in, half expecting the whole mirage to vanish.

But my feet met a floor of some soft rubbery material and the air seemed very hot after that outside. We were in a small empty room that was obviously an airlock. Abruptly my legs crumpled and I fell, still conscious, to the floor. Father knelt and chafed my arms and legs.

Nothing happened for a while, but a sort of thermometer on the wall showed that the temperature was slowly rising from the freezing point. Obviously, the inmates feared that too sudden heat might be harmful to us.

When the temperature was about that of a hot summer's day in New York, the door giving access to the interior of the vessel opened and a man stepped slowly through. I noted as a curious fact that whereas Father's feet made little impression on the floor, the man's feet sank into it, making deep footprints that slowly filled in, when he had passed. Yet the stranger was the smaller of the two.

With a face, that might have been carved in stone, he advanced and indicated to Father that he was to enter the vessel. He bent over and picked me up and carried me in. He staggered as he raised me, as though he found me unexpectedly light.

I had a vague impression of a warm, well-lighted interior, of pictures on the walls, of strange men and of solid blocks of the rubbery material on which they sat. I had an unreasoning conviction that they were friendly to us. The reaction from the stress and strain through which I had passed was overwhelming. I could neither move nor think, but sank into a happy slumber.

My sleep, however, was not one of perfect rest. It was shot through and through with streaks of pain and I lived, again and again, through every detail of that terrible voyage. I dreamed that hideous monsters were tearing my arms and legs from my body or chewing my limbs to shreds. All the time I was dimly conscious that I was making a prolonged and desperate struggle for life,

At last, like a ship sailing out of a stormy sea into a smooth harbor, I woke up. Pain still wracked my body, but it was nothing to the agonies through which I had passed.

A soft orange light filled a cylindrical room that seemed to be underground. Pictures hung on concave walls and exotic flowers grew from saucers of soil on the tables.

I lay, naked, on a rubberlike couch that,

shaping itself exactly to my body, seemed softer than the softest down. Parallel to my bed was another on which lay my father, shockingly emaciated. His ribs showed through his skin, his cheeks were sunken, but his eyes, full of fire as ever, glowed out of dark hollows.

"How thin you are!" I cried and was surprised to find my voice so cracked.

He smiled, a ghastly smile, and observed, "I was thinking how different you yourself are from the chubby youth I used to play with."

Another voice spoke, that of one of our rescuers who was seated near our feet.

"You have both been unconscious for many days," said he. "Frost had bitten deep into your vitals when we found you and you have long been hovering on the brink of death. To aid your recovery and to prevent you feeling the agony of so much dead flesh coming back to life, we have kept you unconscious. Drink is beside you."

The fluid was like thick soup, palatable and obviously highly nourishing. It must have been drugged, for after drinking we immediately dozed again.

SO, WAKING only to eat and drink, we passed the earlier part of our convalescence until we were able to get up and walk a few tottering steps. Men came to see us and some women. All walked with slow, heavy tred, as though gravity dragged at them fiercely.

They bore an air of profound knowledge, and seldom spoke. One man came frequently and stared at us. I had learned to ignore this silent scrutiny when he startled me by speaking.

"They may answer questions," he said, and went out.

Our attendant repeated the remark to the next man who entered. If we could answer questions we could also ask some, thought I.

"Where are we?" I demanded.

"In an underground town at the South Pole," came the ready response. "We saw a light approaching and thought an attack was being made on us. A ship went out to investigate, but the light went out and they could not discover the cause of it.

"They reported that as they were about to return they found a small vessel wrecked and half buried in snow and you two, practically naked, wandering about in a temperature that would have been instantly fatal to any of their crew. Were you tired of life?"

Father gave a short account of our adventures, our visitor being very interested in the object of our journey.

"So visiting the building of knowledge is forbidden. Approach to the monument of our heroic ancestors is punishable with death." His voice, deep and vibrant with passion, showed the first emotion I had noticed in these phlegmatic people. "I might have known it. So be it. They are not worth our labor to preserve: they and their world shall return to cosmic dust."

Our attendant checked his outburst and apologized. He then went on to explain many things. The message I had heard had been left long ago by a man who risked his life to leave it—so long ago, in fact, that, as generations passed without response, its existence had almost been forgotten.

Our rescuers, who called themselves the Isotope People, were the descendants of the scientists and laborers who were originally established on the Moon to maintain the supply of power. Life on the Moon was much harder than on the planet and they retained many mental and physical qualities lost to the main body of the race on the larger globe.

The planetarians had learned to accept as a right the products of the labors of their social inferiors on the satellite. Scientists and leaders of thought had tended to drift to the Moon. The gulf between the two worlds had widened until one had almost forgotten the existence of the other.

Increasing physical differences came to emphasize the division, for as the moon grew smaller it became increasingly charged with exaggerated isotopes, matter having an exceptionally large number of protons and electrons in the nuclei of its atoms.

No matter what precautions were taken their own bodies became charged with isotopes that manifested their presence in increasing weight for size. They breathed them in in their air, they ate them in their food, they drank them.

The disadvantages of this state of affairs were twofold. In the first place the fluids of the body tended to solidify readily, making the owner very sensitive to cold. In the second place, if the possessor of an isotope body were exposed to the rays of an atomic power machine, then, should the substance from which the power was being obtained contain any elements that had their counter-

parts in the human body, the atoms in the body would recognize and absorb the rays.

For each element produces and absorbs rays of its own particular band of wave lengths. This led to electrons jumping out of too-bulky nuclei and to new and perhaps dangerous elements appearing in the body.

Stringent precautions had therefore to be taken against exposure to cold or to power rays. To prevent the process going too far they had built this secret city under the eternal ice, where they spent their vacations and returned to normal. No person not of mature age was allowed on the moon. And for every period spent there, a period six times as long had to be spent on the earth.

Indeed, with the reduction in size of the stellite, not more than a seventh of their number could conveniently be there at one time. Their leader himself had spent more than the average proportion of time on the moon and his body was about twice as heavy as it should be.

It was to relieve their muscles as far as possible of the strain of carrying these weights when exposed to the gravity of the earth that their chairs, couches and floors were composed of the soft, rubberlike composition I had noticed.

CHAPTER VI

The Return

THE war, he stated, in response to our query, had resulted in a complete victory for the North. The raiding ships of the South had been destroyed by men hidden in the artificial suns and using the tremendous power of those bodies to project rays against which nothing could stand. All the Southern globes had been destroyed and ice now covered practically the entire hemisphere.

It seemed that the North had determined on extermination. All pleading for peace had been ignored. Towns were still being destroyed and survivors were barred out of the North by a wall of vibrations. This inhuman savagery had done more than anything else to convince the isotope people that the time was ripe to come out and leave the planet to its fate.

"How much longer will the power last?" we queried.

"Years yet, but it has grown very hard to obtain and there is much resentment at our continued slavery to support a people who are not worth it. You see, there is not only the question of keeping up the heat and light of the earth—the great beam of magnetism that holds the moon in place is a continuous drain on our resources.

"Let me explain. Every magnet has a north and a south pole. Like poles of magnets repel each other, unlike poles attract. Our space-ships travel through space by focusing a beam of magnetism on the pole of their objective that gives forth magnetism of the opposite polarity. The Moon is held in position by a beam of power of the same polarity as the North Pole of the Earth.

"When the power fails the Moon will fall. Although it is smaller now it is still as heavy as ever, the reduction in bulk being simply due to the greater part of it consisting of extreme isotopes. Were the mighty prop to fail, the fantastically solid and compact body would hurtle down and pass through the crust of the planet as a rifle bullet passes through a sheet of paper."

"Then the planet, the Moon and the whole human race will be destroyed," I cried.

"The planet and the Moon, yes—but not the whole human race. We have made preparations against that day. Beneath the ice we have constructed huge space-fliers, capable of carrying all our people. There is another planet, the third from the sun, which we are confident is suitable for mankind. At present it is recovering from the grip of an ice-age."

"But the people," exclaimed Father, "who will be left behind. Won't you warn them, and give them a chance to build ships so that some of them also may escape?"

The isotope man shrugged. "They have shown themselves unworthy of saving," he responded.

Father began to plead for them. The people were not responsible for the actions of their rulers, he said.

"They have the government they deserve," replied the other as one who argues with a persistent child. "The people themselves would be the first to rend you for trying to help them. In any event, how would you give them the message? Only the official radios are capable of receiving messages from space and it is hopeless to try them. Everything from the South is barred out by the elec-

tronic barrier."

"It can be done," exclaimed Father. "In my own house I have a machine capable of broadcasting to the entire planet. I will return and warn them myself."

"It would be suicide," said the isotope man, "but I will convey your offer to the Ruling Council at the next meeting. Of course, you cannot be allowed to take any steps until the physician pronounces you fully recovered. But I will undertake that no decisive steps will be taken without your knowledge."

With these words he went.

DURING the next few days we roamed about the underground or, rather, under-ice town. There was not much to describe. It consisted of compartments where the people had their homes, interlacing tunnels and spherical halls—some of them so huge that one had the illusion of being in the open air—in which public business, work, and recreations were carried on.

The orange light glowed everywhere and at every corner were maps with black arrows showing one's location at the moment. As one walked in these passages or halls one's reflection walked upside down above one, for the ceilings were perfect mirrors designed to reflect back the heat, and avoid melting the ice above.

In the larger of these halls the gigantic space-ships were being completed, operations that involved the use of the tremendous electrical and magnetic forces that produced the brilliant aurora we had followed for so long.

In intense white light hundreds of little black figures labored on the mighty hulls and the air resounded with hissings and thuddings. Accustomed to a world where work was almost unknown, the spectacle of so many men, each contributing his own strenuous efforts to the common pool, impressed me profoundly.

It seemed to me that no difficulty could long resist that concentrated endeavor. And I was right—if the human race will but strive together with a common will there is nothing in nature that will not have to give way in the end.

Once all danger was past our recovery proceeded so rapidly that it seemed but a few days from when the physician pronounced us able to answer questions until we were summoned before the Council. Our interview was short. Father repeated his determination to return and warn the people. And the Council, after telling us that we were uselessly throwing away our lives, agreed.

"All the space-ships are completed," said the leader, "and some of them have already started on their way. Everything essential is aboard the ships that are left and the planet can be evacuated within an hour. You, accompanied by one volunteer, will take a standard space-flier, size fourteen, and carry out your mission.

"When your message has been given, whatever the response, you will leave immediately, supposing you are capable of doing so, in the space-flier for a rendezvous in space where you will find the fleet ready to start the interplanetary flight.

"Should you meet with success, which we doubt, sufficient men will remain to insure the maintenance of the system for another thirty years, the extreme limit. We shall be watching. If your reception is hostile we shall at once abandon the moon. When the light of the globes goes out you will know there is no time to be lost, but that you must at once start off into space if you do not wish to be left behind. Go!"

I insisted on accompanying him. In spite of his protests I got my way and we started on that fatal journey together. I carried myself, I fear, with an air of conspicuous heroism, but it vanished before the matter-of-fact manner of the isotope man who was to be our guide and share our dangers.

Like an ordinary helicopter we rose until our pilot threw on the magnetic power. Anyone who has seen iron filings arrange themselves into curved lines of force round a magnet will understand how, finding one of these lines in the magnetic field of the planet, we were carried in a parabola from the pole we repelled to the one we attracted. A few hours sufficed for this leap through space, then we were settling down in the manner of an ordinary airplane in the North.

After the devastation in the South it was startling to find the North but little affected. I knew not whether to admire their more effective strategy or to regard their greater preparedness as proof of a premeditated attack.

In any case, with a fate as terrible as that of the vanquished facing the victors, the question was of little moment. That bright-lit, apparently prosperous landscape appeared to me like a bubble liable to burst at any minute, for all-devouring fire and ruin to

pour through.

Straight from the clouds we dropped, this being our best chance of avoiding inquisitive aircraft. The whirring propellers deposited us gently amongst the shrubbery in the garden of our late home. From the outside, it appeared undamaged and it seemed strange that we could not walk in and continue living our lives as we had lived them before my rash visit to the forbidden building.

The house seemed to say sadly, "Within these walls you were born. Under this roof you were reared. Come in and I will provide the comfort and security I have always given you." But it lied. Our home was now a place of danger for us.

Stealthily we entered our own home. Once within, the rough hand of officialdom was apparent. The place had been ransacked. Pictures had been torn down, beautiful ornaments wantonly smashed, everything likely to arouse the covetousness of rough men was gone.

Strangely enough the radio apparatus that had been my father's special pride was undamaged. Nothing here was likely to interest ignorant marauders. With a grunt of satisfaction Father settled himself in front of his instrument board. No time was now to be wasted if we were to give a last warning to a doomed planet before the authorities could stop us. The apparatus responded to his touch and soon he was ready to broadcast.

I shivered suddenly and realized that this was highly unusual. The light, also, was less bright than was customary. I wondered whether the power was already beginning to fail or whether the cold of the South was making itself felt in the North.

Father was speaking, words that must have sounded like the wildest of ravings to his millions of astonished listeners. His voice was deep, and powerful to an extent I had not thought him capable of. Beside him stood the isotope man like a grim, motionless statue, thickly wrapped in special heat-retaining clothing against an atmosphere that must have been bitterly cold to him. Both were visible to the whole hemisphere.

NEXT ISSUE

THE MARTIAN GESTURE

A Hall of Fame Novelet

By ALEXANDER M. PHILLIPS

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER VII

Lost in the Void

"PEOPLE of the world," cried my father, "rouse yourselves, for doom stares you in the face. Already your heat globes grow dim. Your power is failing fast. Ignore it much longer and nothing can save any man, woman and child from fiery destruction."

"*Ssssss.*" It was the police warning to desist.

"There is yet time. With care the power in the moon can be made to last for a generation. Time enough for space-ships to be built—"

"*Ssssss!* This is your last warning."

"In which many of you may escape. But if you show yourselves indifferent, the people of the Moon will cease their prodigious labors to keep the failing system going. The Moon will fall and—"

"*Ssssss—ssssss—ssssss!*" went the police transmitter, drowning, even in the room we were in, every further word he spoke.

The outside sky was thick with airplanes, like wasps from a disturbed nest on a summer's day. The house was surrounded with people, many of whem were shouting, "Shut your—mouth!" . . . "Death to the madman!" . . . "Kill the lunatic!"

We might have got away through a side window to where our number-14 size space-flier was waiting to carry us to the waiting fleet and safety. But Father preferred to carry on with his mission to the end. He shut off the machines, stopped that infernal hissing, and stalked to the open window. The isotope man stood stolid beside him, offering no comment, and I appeared at the next window.

"Foolish people," he went on, "I come to save you. Unless you act and act at once, fate will be upon you in a few hours. Already your light grows dim."

I thrilled with admiration at the spectacle of these two isolated men thus facing, unarmed, the angry mob in which not a voice was raised in their favor. But the average man, who hides himself in the crowd, has an instinctive hatred of the man who stands alone. One such can usually be found to strike a blow at helpless solitary figures.

It was so now. Someone outside laughed an insane laugh, I saw a hand with a black object appear above the heads and a disintegrator ray stabbed out. Where the two men had been was a great hole from which the timber and masonry had fallen. A terrible scream was the last I ever heard from my father.

The isotope man was as silent in death as he had been in life.

I stood at the edge of that hole, of that hideous wound in the side of our house, stunned by the shock. I could not realize that my father was dead. The very suddenness of the blow prevented my feeling any sorrow at the time. Years afterward I was to realize that death comes to us all, that Father had at least died in the way he would have chosen.

Like a man in a trance I was conscious of people round me, of being jeered at and asked questions. Then soldiers came, but I cared not what they did to me. At last the pain of their arm twisting and other torture forced me to attend to them. They were asking questions about our "confederates," questions that I could not answer, for I was not sure whether the people at the pole were ready to resist an attack.

"Take the stubborn lout to headquarters," growled an officer, "hypnotic drugs will make him speak."

At that moment soldiers and house vanished from view. A complete blackness had fallen on everything. Finding myself released, I turned round to see one of the artificial suns glowing red in the sky for a few seconds. Then it had gone.

Somebody screamed in terror. "The power has failed! The power has failed!" His rushing feet, stumbling in his haste to get out of the house, resounded through an intense stillness.

Panic followed. Forgetting me, the soldiers sought only to get away, though where they could go I knew not. In a few minutes I was alone in my ruined home with the bodies of my father and his friend.

Tears streaming silently down my cheeks, I searched for them with a light beam. All I found was a heap of rubble, beneath which, what was left of them probably lay. There was ample evidence they could not have survived.

Caring not what happened, I collected warm coverings and tried to sleep. Later I rose and went in search of more coverings.

WHEN I awoke, shivering, I found a small sun, the natural one, low in the heavens, sneering as if in mockery of day. It shone on a world already changed. Flowers and plants had blackened and wilted at the touch of frost, the ground was white with snow and the lake had a film of ice.

A longing to get away from this place seized me—from this place with its many tender associations that were now so painful. Finding the space-flier among the bushes I got in and gave the starting handle such a savage jerk that the vessel shot upwards with a force that threw me backwards.

The controls of the flying machine were similiar to those I had been accustomed to and presented few difficulties to me. I checked the upward rush, leveled her out and set her racing forward. She was tearing north, a useless direction, but what did it matter?

I let her run for hours, not even keeping a lookout. Suddenly a tremendous glare of white light glowed ahead, as though the earth had opened and gushed forth a fountain of flame.

The white flare passed to give place to a leaping red glow. Abruptly the explanation rushed into my mind with crushing force. The moon had fallen!

A terrific wave of air-pressure struck my little craft, making it spin over and over. Then it began to rain stones, earth and trees, objects that had been torn up and thrown high in the air by the shock in its passage, then left behind. Comparative calm followed and I looked down to see that not a house or tree remained standing.

No vessel but my own, rigidly constructed by the isotope people, could have lived in the air. Hills had been flattened out or built up, altering the contour of the land. Seas had left their beds. Angry rumbles sounded from below and wide cracks in the ground belched forth fire and smoke.

Fine ashes filled the air. A thunderstorm burst and rain poured down. The lightning showed an unfamiliar landscape, white in places and black in others, and turned the glowing red spots into columns of smoke.

I went up to get above the storm. It was just that the North should meet a fate as terrible as they had wreaked on the South, even though I was inevitably involved in it. No matter how high I went I was buffeted by winds that threatened to start a crack in my sides and let out the air. The atmos-

phere here was, of course, much too rare to breathe. Peace was to be found only beyond the atmosphere.

Fumbling with the unfamiliar knobs and levers I presently succeeded in getting the repelling ray in operation. The space-flier jumped out of the atmosphere, following a line of force in the planet's magnetic field. That, however, would take me only to the opposite pole and there was no object in that.

Size number-14 vessels, designed for journeys to and from the moon, had magnetic rays of an effective radius of a few hundred thousand miles only. And now there was no Moon for me to reach up to, even had I known how to start an interplanetary flight.

Beside me was an instrument board with the words "Destination Finder," bearing various handles and knobs, the largest knob having a curved, double-headed arrow above it, and the words *To broaden* on the left, *To focus* on the right. When I switched on, a circular map of stars appeared on a black screen.

Correctly I surmised this to be a view of that part of the sky included in the sweep of the ray. All the bodies shown were much too far away to aid me. But in one place appeared a bright red spot that I could not see on looking out of the window. Did that mean that I had found an object in space that my ray was capable of acting on?

TURNING the handles to keep the red spot always within the circle, I began to focus the ray. The stars in the circle seemed to come towards me, the outer ones disappearing beyond its edge.

I began to feel as though gravity were tugging me upwards, proving that I was forcing myself away from my objective. Switching off, I changed the polarity of my beam from South to North, and switched on again. The ship and the whole universe seemed to swing upside down, the planet now below me and my objective above.

The planet dropped away with ever increasing speed as I shot into the void. Closer and closer came my target until I saw it was none other than a space-ship of the isotope people, probably at rendezvous spoken of.

Despairingly I changed the polarity of the beam to repel the ship from me.

The ship loomed gigantic in the heavens, rushing toward me. Then I saw with immense relief that I was going to miss it. At terrific speed I hurtled past and rushed on into space.

A fresh problem confronted me: that of turning round in space, or of training my beam through the underside of the vessel. Though I studied the lever and dials a hundred times, none of them offered any help, and all the time I was helplessly hurtling on into the void.

In despair I tried this lever and that, until, in my ignorance, I touched something I should have left alone. There was a crackling of sparks, a brief flash of blue flame, and all the machinery stopped and remained dead.

All round were the cold, distant stars, among which, the disc, that was the world I had left, stared at me mockingly. Ages passed and I could do nothing. I seemed to hang motionless and weightless in an infinite empty space.

Not entirely weightless. After a very long time I found I had some weight, just a few pounds, and tended to fall towards that part of the vessel I called the "top." That meant some exterior force was acting on the vessel. I concluded I was still chained by gravity to the planet I had left and was beginning to fall back onto it.

My weight increased, and I realized it could not be gravity that was thus acting on my vessel but not on my body. At the same time I saw that I would not collide with the planet, but would travel in an orbit of my own.

My weight decreased to nothing—but now I saw something that sent me wild with joy. It was the space-ship of the isotope people. They had seen me pass, a great magnetic beam had reached out into the void, found me and was drawing me to safety!

Slower and slower I approached the ship or rather caught up with it, for it was already well under way. I turned to look at the planet we were leaving. A startling thing occurred, a thing I thought was an illusion.

One moment the world was there, pale but clear, like our own moon shining in the sky before the sun has set, but smaller. The next moment it was not and there was nothing but a lot of fragments, slowly widening their distance from one another.

A frightful explosion had occurred: I had witnessed the end of our world and the formation of the asteroidal belt, that collection of small worlds that circle the sun in the orbit that was once that of our planet, be-

tween the paths of Mars and of mighty Jupiter.

The explanation was that the highly concentrated Moon, on meeting the internal fires of the globe, had begun to absorb all the available quanta of energy. As it did so it expanded, until the crust of the planet burst asunder with the strain, with the results I saw.

I boarded the ship safely and we continued our journey to the distant earth, soon a conspicuous object in the sky, in which the ice of the poles and the warm, fertile country between could be picked out by the naked eye.

I remember little more. Not all the ships reached this earth safely, but some of them must have done so and the passengers established themselves here. Whether they or their descendants relapsed into savagery and gave rise to the Cro-Magnons, the first true men whose tools and bones have been found, or whether they found people here before them and were swallowed up in the race, I cannot say.

All I can say with certainty is that that boy, Hasteen, became the ancestor of me, Christopher Barlem, and probably, through innumerable lines of decent, of every human being on this earth today.

FROM THE OBSERVATORY

THERE'S A new supernova in Cygnus, which is exciting current astronomical interest. But, as it occurred some 4,000,000 years ago, this explosion in the distant nebula is nothing to worry about. On the whole it's a good thing, for if our sun took on such brightness it would be multiplied 2,000,000 times and Earth would long since have been vaporized.

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RECENT archeological discoveries in Mexico by diggers under the direction of Dr. Hellmut de Terra indicate that America may have had its artists—sculptors in this case—some 20,000 years ago, when the Cromagnons were decorating the caverns of France. We seem to be older than we thought until recently —and a lot more cultured.

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ACCORDING to astronomers, Dr. Otto Struve and Mogens Rudkjobing of the Universities of Texas and Chicago, the growingest things in the heavens at present are small red stars which seem to attract and absorb clouds of cosmic dust. Blue-white stars, on the other hand, seem to repel such particles. May be another red menace in the making.

•

SEISMOLOGISTS live a shaky existence—especially since their sensitive instruments record an average of some 85 earthquakes a day. Most of these tremors are too small to be felt by any but the most delicate recording devices.

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LONDONDERRY, Ireland, Anthropologist Dr. R. E. G. Armattoe crosses up one of the most cherished beliefs of less favored mortals when he states authoritatively that geniuses are not doomed to short lives. On the contrary, men of superior mental capacity have much more than a normal health and life expectancy. He cites Einstein, Shaw and Sibelius as living proofs of his theory.

There was a terrible silence as New York began to fade

THE VISITOR

By Ray Bradbury

Exiles on Mars face a barren future until Leonard Mark brings a glimpse of freedom

SAUL WILLIAMS awoke to the still morning. He looked wearily out of his tent and thought about how far away Earth was. Millions of miles, he thought. It was very bad. But then what could you do about it? Your lungs were full of the "blood-rust." You coughed all the time.

Saul arose this particular morning at seven o'clock. He was a tall man, lean, thinned by his illness. It was a quiet morning on Mars, with the dead sea bottom flat and silent, no wind on it. The sun was clear and cool in the empty sky. He washed his face and ate breakfast.

After that, he wanted very much to be

back on Earth. During the day he tried every way that it was possible to be in New York City. Sometimes, if he sat right and held his hands a certain way, he did it. He could almost smell New York. Most of the time, though, it was impossible.

Later in the morning, Saul tried to die. He lay on the sand and told his heart to stop. It continued beating. He imagined himself leaping from a cliff or cutting his wrists, but laughed to himself—for he knew he lacked the nerve for either act.

Maybe if I squeeze tight and think about it enough, I'll just sleep and never wake, he thought. He tried it. An hour later he awoke with a mouth full of blood. He got up and spat it out and felt very sorry for himself. This "blood-rust," it filled your mouth and your nose, it ran from your ears, your fingernails, and it took a year to kill you. The only cure was shoving you in a rocket and shooting you out to exile on Mars. There was no known cure on Earth, and remaining there would contaminate and kill others. So here he was, bleeding all the time, and lonely.

Saul's eyes narrowed. In the distance, by an ancient city ruin, he saw another man lying on a filthy blanket.

When Saul walked up, the man on the blanket stirred weakly.

"Hello, Saul," he said.

"Another morning," said Saul. "Golly, I'm lonely!"

"It is an affliction of the rusted ones," said the man on the blanket, not moving, very pale and as if he might vanish if you touched him.

"I wish to heaven," said Saul, looking down at the man, "that you were at least an intellectual. Why is it that intellectuals never get the blood rust and come up here?"

"It is a conspiracy against you, Saul," said the man, shutting his eyes, too weary to keep them open. "Once I had the strength to be an intellectual. Now, it is a job to think."

"If only we could talk about Plato or Swift or Racine," said Saul Williams.

THE OTHER man merely shrugged indifferently.

"Come tomorrow. Perhaps I'll have enough strength to talk about Aristotle then. I'll try, really I will." The man sank down under the worn tree. He opened one eye. "Remember, once we did talk on Aristotle, six months ago, on that good day I had."

"I remember," said Saul, not listening. He looked at the dead sea. "I wish I was as sick as you, then maybe I wouldn't worry about being an intellectual. Then maybe I'd get some peace."

"You'll get as bad as I am now in about six months," said the dying man. "Then you won't care about anything but sleep and more sleep. Sleep will be like a woman to you. You'll always go back to her, because she's fresh and good and faithful and she always treats you kindly and the same. You only wake up so you can think about going back to sleep. It's a nice thought." The man's voice was a bare whisper. Now it stopped and a light breathing took over.

Saul walked off.

Along the shores of the dead sea, like so many emptied bottles flung up by some long gone wave, were the huddled bodies of sleeping men. Saul could see them all down the curve of the empty sea. One, two, three, all of them sleeping alone, most of them worse off than he, each with his little cache of food, each grown into himself, because social converse was weakening and sleep was good.

At first there had been a few nights around mutual campfires. And they had all talked about Earth. That was the only thing they talked about. Earth and the way the waters ran in town creeks and what mother's deep dish apple pie tasted like and how New York looked in the early morning coming over on the Jersey ferry in the salt wind.

I want Earth, thought Saul. I want it so bad it hurts. I want something I can never have again. And they all want it and it hurts them not to have it. More than food or a woman or anything, I just want Earth. This sickness puts women away forever, they're not things to be wanted. But, Earth, yes, that's a thing for the mind and not the weak body.

The bright metal flashed on the sky.

Saul looked up.

The bright metal flashed again.

A minute later the rocket landed on the sea bottom. A valve opened, a man stepped out, carrying his luggage with him. Two other men, in protective germicide suits, accompanied him, bringing out vast cases of food, setting up a tent for him.

Another minute and the rocket returned to the sky. The exile stood alone.

Saul began to run. He hadn't run in weeks, and it was very tiring, but he ran

and yelled.

"Hello, hello!"

The young man looked Saul up and down when he arrived. He put out his hand. "Hello. So this is Mars. My name's Leonard Mark."

"I'm Saul Williams."

They shook hands and Leonard Mark was very young, only eighteen, very blond, pink-faced, blue-eyed and fresh in spite of his illness.

"How are things in New York!" said Saul.

"Like this," said Leonard Mark. And he looked at Saul.

New York grew up out of the desert, made of stone and filled with March winds. Neons exploded in electric color. Yellow taxis glided in a still night. Bridges rose and tugs chanted in the midnight harbors. Curtains rose on spangled musicals.

Saul put his hands to his head, violently. "Hold on, hold on!" he cried. "What's happening to me? What's wrong with me? I'm going crazy!"

Leaves sprouted from trees in Central Park, green and new. On the pathway, Saul strolled along, smelling the air. He filled his lungs and started to cry, it was so good. Tears rolled down his face.

"Stop it, stop it, you fool!" Saul shouted at himself. He pressed his forehead with his hands. "This can't be!"

"It is," said Leonard Mark.

The New York towers faded. Mars returned. Saul stood on the empty sea bottom, staring limply at the young newcomer.

"You," he said, putting his hand out to Leonard Mark. "You did it. You did it with your mind. You put me in New York just now."

"Yes," said Leonard Mark.

SILENTLY they stood facing each other. Finally, trembling, Saul seized the other exile's hand and wrung it again and again, saying, "Oh, but I'm glad you're here. You can't know how glad I am!"

They drank their rich brown coffee from the tin cups.

It was high noon. They had been talking all through the warm morning time.

They had a second cup of coffee, sitting there on the hot sand.

"And this ability of yours?" said Saul over his cup, looking steadily at the young Leonard Mark.

"It's just something I was born with," said Mark, looking into his drink. "My mother was in the Blow-up of London back in 'Fifty-seven. I was born ten months later. I don't know what you'd call my ability. Telepathy and thought-transference, I suppose. I used to have an act. I traveled all around the world. Leonard Mark, the mental marvel, they said on the billboards. I was pretty well off. Most people thought I was a charlatan. You know what people think of theatrical folks. Only I knew I was really genuine, but I didn't let anybody know. It was safer not to let it get around too much. Oh, a few of my close friends knew about my *real* ability. I had a lot of talents that will come in handy now that I'm here on Mars."

"You sure scared the daylights out of me," said Saul, his cup rigid in his hand. "When New York came right up out of the ground that way, I thought I was insane."

"It's a form of hypnotism which effects all of the sensual organs at once, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin, all of them. What would you like to be doing now, most of all?"

Saul put down his cup. He tried to hold his hands very steady. He wet his lips. "I'd like to be in a little creek I used to swim in in Mellin Town, Illinois, when I was a kid. I'd like to be stark naked and swimming."

"Well," said Leonard Mark and moved his head ever so little.

Saul fell back on the sand, his eyes shut.

Leonard Mark sat watching him.

Saul lay on the sand. From time to time his hands moved, twitched excitedly, his mouth spasmed open, sounds issued out of his tightening and relaxing throat.

Saul began to make slow movements of his arms, out and back, out and back, gasping with his head to one side, his arms going and coming slowly on the warm air, stirring the yellow sand under him, his body turning slowly over.

Leonard Mark quietly finished his coffee. While he drank he kept his eyes on the moving, whispering Saul lying there on the dead sea bottom.

"All right," said Leonard Mark.

Saul sat up, rubbing his face.

After a moment he told Leonard Mark, "I *saw* the creek. I ran along the bank and I took off my clothes," he said, breathlessly, his smile incredulous. "And I *dived in* and swam around!"

"I'm glad," said Leonard Mark.

"It was cool and fine, ah, but it was fine!"

"I'm pleased," said Leonard Mark.

"Here." Saul reached into his pocket and drew forth his last bar of chocolate. "This is for *you*."

"What's this?" Leonard Mark looked at the gift. "Chocolate? Nonsense, I'm not doing this for pay. I'm doing it because it makes you happy. Put that thing back in your pocket before I turn it into a rattle snake and it bites you."

"Thank you, thank you!" Saul put it away. "You don't know how good that water was." He fetched the coffee pot. "More?"

"Good idea," said Leonard Mark.

Pouring the coffee, Saul shut his eyes a moment.

I've got Socrates here, he thought, Socrates and Plato, and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. This man, by his talk, is a genius. By his talent, he's incredible! Ah, think of the long easy days and the cool nights of talk we'll have! It won't be a bad year at all. Not half.

He spilled the coffee.

"What's wrong?" asked Mark, startled.

"Nothing." Saul was confused, startled, himself. For it had just come to him. Like a light bulb switched on. A simple thing.

WE'LL be in Greece, he thought. In Athens. We'll be in Rome, if we want, when we study the Roman writers. We'll stand in the Parthenon and the Acropolis. It won't be just talk, but it'll be a place to be, besides. This man can do it. He has the power to do it. When we talk the plays of Racine, he can make a stage and players and all of it for me. By heavens, this is better than life ever was! How much better to be sick and here, than well on Earth without these abilities! How many people have ever seen a Greek drama played in a Greek amphitheatre in the year Thirty-one B.C.?

And if I ask, quietly and earnestly, will this man take on the aspect of Schopenhauer and Darwin and Bergson and all the other men of thought of the ages? Yes; why not? To sit and talk with Nietzsche, in person; with Plato himself!

There was only one thing wrong. Saul felt himself swaying.

The other men. The other sick ones along the bottom of this dead sea.

Saul began to twitch. He looked at the dead sea bottom.

In the distance, men were moving, walking toward them. They had seen the rocket flash, land, dislodge a passenger. Now they were coming, slowly, painfully, to greet the new arrival.

Saul was cold. "Look," he said. "Mark, I think we'd better head for the mountains."

"Why?"

"See those men coming, some of them are insane."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Isolation and all make them that way?"

"Yes, that's it. We'd better get going."

"They don't look very dangerous. They move slowly."

"You'd be surprised."

Mark looked at Saul. "Why, you're white and trembling. Why's that?"

"We haven't time to talk," said Saul, getting up swiftly. "Come on. Don't you realize what'll happen once they discover your talent? They'll fight over you, they'll kill each other, kill you, for the right to own you."

"Oh, but I don't belong to anybody," said Leonard Mark. He looked at Saul. "No. Not even *you*."

Saul jerked his head. "I didn't even think of that."

"No? Didn't you, now?" Mark laughed.

"We haven't time to argue," answered Saul, eyes blinking, cheeks blazing. "Come on!"

"I don't want to. I'm going to sit right here until those men show up. You're a little too possessive. My life's my own."

Saul felt an ugliness in himself. His face began to twist. "You *heard* what I said," he said, slowly.

"How very quickly you changed from a friend to an enemy," observed Mark.

Saul hit him. It was a neat quick blow, coming down.

Mark ducked aside, laughing. "No, you don't!"

They were in the center of Times Square. Cars roared, hooting, upon them. Buildings plunged up, hot, into the blue air.

"It's a lie!" cried Saul, staggering under the visual impact. "For heaven's sake, don't, Mark! The men are coming. You'll be killed!"

Mark sat there on the pavement, laughing at his joke. "Let them come, I can fool them all!"

New York distracted Saul. It was meant to distract—meant to keep his attention with

its unholy beauty, after so many months away from it. Instead of attacking Mark he could only stand, drinking in the alien but familiar scene.

He shut his eyes. "No." And fell forward, dragging Mark with him. Horns screamed in his ears. Brakes hissed and caught violently. He smashed at Mark's chin.

Silence.

Mark lay on the sea bottom.

Taking the unconscious man in his arms, Saul began to run, heavily, weakly, staggering.

New York was gone. There was only the wide soundlessness of the dead sea. The men were closing in around him. He headed for the hills with his precious cargo, with New York and green country and fresh springs and old friends held in his arms. He fell once and struggled up. He did not stop running.

NIGHT filled the cave. The wind wandered in and out, tugging at the small fire, scattering ashes.

Mark opened his eyes. He was tied with ropes and leaned against the dry wall of the cave, facing the fire.

Saul put another stick on the fire, glancing now and again with a cat-like nervousness at the cave entrance.

"You're a fool."

Saul started.

"Yes," said Mark. "You're a fool. They'll find us. If they have to hunt for six months they'll find us. They saw New York, at a distance, like a mirage. And us in the center of it. It's too much to think they won't be curious and follow our trail."

"I'll move on with you, then," said Saul, staring into the fire.

"And they'll come after."

"Shut up!"

Mark smiled. "Is that the way to speak to your wife?"

"You heard me!"

"Oh, a fine marriage this is, your greed and my mental ability. What do you want to see now? Shall I show you a few more of your childhood scenes?"

Saul felt the sweat coming out on his brow. He didn't know if the man was joking or not. "Yes," he said, tightly. He couldn't keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"All right," said Mark. "Watch!"

Saul leaned forward, breathing out and in rapidly, eyes wide and feverish.

Flame gushed out of the rocks. Sulphur choked him. Pits of brimstone exploded, concussions rocked the caved. Heaving up, he coughed and blundered, burnt, withered by Hell!

Hell went away. The cave returned.

Mark was laughing.

Saul stood over him. "You," he said, coldly, bending down. "You *are* cruel aren't you!"

"What else do you expect?" cried Mark, angry now himself. "To be tied up, toted off, made the intellectual bride of a man insane with loneliness, do you think I enjoy this?"

"I'll untie you if you promise not to run away."

"I couldn't promise that. I'm a free agent. I don't belong to anybody."

Saul got down on his knees. "But you've *got* to belong, do you hear, you've *got* to belong. I can't let you go away!"

"My dear fellow, the more you say things like that, the more remote I am. If you'd had any sense and done things intelligently, we'd have been friends, I'd have been glad to do you these little hypnotic favors. After all, they're no trouble for me to conjure up. Fun, really. But you've botched it. You wanted me all to yourself. You were afraid the others would take me away from you. Oh, how mistaken you were. I have enough power to keep them all happy. You could have shared me, like a community chicken. I'd have felt quite like a god among children, being kind, doing favors, in return for which you might bring me little gifts, special tit-bits of food."

The enormity of his mistake crushed Saul. He felt bitterness with himself rise in his throat. He pounded his knees with his hands.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he cried. "But I know those men too well."

"Are you any different? Hardly. Go out and see if they're coming, I thought I heard a noise!" Mark nodded his head to the entrance.

Saul ran. In the cave entrance, he cupped his hands, peering down into the night-filled gully. Dim shapes stirred, was it only the wind blowing the roving clumps of weed? He began to tremble, a fine aching tremble.

"I don't see anything." He came back into an empty cave.

He stared at the fire place. "Mark!"

Mark was gone.

There was nothing but the cave, filled with boulders, stones, pebbles, the lonely fire flickering, the wind sighing. And Saul standing there, incredulous and numb.

"Mark, Mark! Come back!"

The man had worked free of his bonds, slowly, carefully, and using the ruse of imagining he heard other men approaching, had gone—where?

THE CAVE was deep, but ended in a blank wall. And Mark could not have slipped past him into the night. How then?

Saul stepped around the fire. He drew his knife and approached a large boulder that stood against the cave wall. Smiling, he pressed the knife against the boulder. Smiling he tapped the knife there. Then, he drew his knife back to plunge it into the boulder.

"Stop!" screamed Mark.

The boulder vanished. Mark was there.

Saul suspended his knife. The fire played on his cheeks. His eyes were quite insane.

"It didn't work," he whispered. He reached down and put his hands on Mark's throat and closed his fingers. Mark said nothing, but moved uneasily in the grip, his eyes ironic, telling things to Saul that Saul knew.

If you kill me, the eyes said, where will all your dreams be? Gone. If you kill me, where will all the streams and brook trout be? And the dutch kitchen, and the October nights? Kill me, kill Plato, kill Aristotle, kill Einstein, yes, kill all of us! Go ahead, strangle me. I dare you.

Saul sweated. His fingers released the throat.

Mark took a deep breath. He didn't thank Saul for letting him live. He only said, once more, "You're a fool."

Shadows moved into the cave mouth.

Both men turned their heads.

The men were there, Five of them, haggard with travel, panting, waiting in the outer rim of light. Like animals come to carrion, they were there.

"Good evening," called Mark, laughing. "Come in, come in, gentlemen!"

By dawn the arguments and ferocities still continued. Mark sat among the glaring men, rubbing his wrists, newly released from his bonds. He created a mahogany paneled conference hall and a marble table at which they all sat, ridiculously bearded, evil-smelling, sweating and greedy men, eyes bent upon their treasure.

"The way to settle it," said Mark at last, "is for each of you to have certain hours of certain days for appointments with me. I'll treat all equally. I'll be city property, free to come and go. That's fair enough. As for Saul, here, he's on probation. When he's proved he can be a civil person once more, I'll give him a treatment or two. Until that time, I'll have nothing to do with him."

The other exiles grinned at Saul. They were the select, he was the outcast. Saul humbled himself.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know what I was doing. I'm all right now."

"We'll see," said Mark. "Let's give ourselves a month, shall we?"

The other men smirked at Saul.

Saul said nothing. He sat staring at the floor of the cave.

"Let's see now," said Mark. "On Mondays, it's your day, Smith."

Smith nodded.

"On Tuesday I'll take Peter there, for an hour or so."

Peter shook his hand.

"On Wednesdays, I'll finish up with Johnson, Holtzman, and Jim, here."

The last three men looked at each other.

"The rest of the week I'm to be left strictly alone, do you hear?" Mark told them. "A little should be better than nothing. If you don't obey, I won't perform at all."

"Maybe we'll *make* you perform," said Johnson. He caught the other men's eyes. "Look, we're five against his one. We can make him do anything we want. If we cooperate, we've got a great thing here."

"Don't be idiots," Mark warned the other men.

"Let me talk," said Johnson. "He's telling *us* what he'll do. Ha! Why don't we tell *him!* Are we bigger than him, or not? And him threatening not to perform? Well, just let me get a sliver of wood under his toenails, and maybe burn his fingers a bit with a steel file and we'll see if he performs! Why shouldn't we have performances, I want to know, every night in the week?"

"Don't listen to him!" said Mark. "He's crazy. He can't be depended on. You know what he'll do, don't you? He'll get you all off guard, one by one, and kill you, yes, kill all of you, so that, when he's done, he'll be alone just him and me! That's his sort."

The listening men blinked. First at Mark, then at Johnson.

"For that matter," observed Mark. "None of you can trust the others. This is a fool's conference. The minute your back is turned one of the other men will murder you. I dare say, at the week's end, you'll all be dead or dying."

A COLD WIND blew into the mahogany room. It began to dissolve and become a cave once more. Mark was tired of his joke. The marble table splashed and rained and evaporated.

The men gazed suspiciously at each other with little bright animal eyes. What was spoken was true. They saw each other in the days to come, surprising one another, killing—until that last lucky one remained to enjoy the intellectual treasure that walked among them.

Saul watched them and felt alone and disquieted. Once you have made a mistake, how hard to admit your wrongness, go back, start fresh. They were *all* wrong. They had been lost a long time, now they were worse than lost.

"And to make matters very bad," said Mark, at last. "One of you has a gun. All the rest of you have only knives. But one of you, I know, has a gun!"

Everybody jumped up. "Search!" cried Mark. "Find the one with the gun or you're all dead!"

That did it. The men plunged wildly about, not knowing whom to search first. Their hands grappled, they cried out, and Mark watched them in contempt.

Johnson fell back, feeling in his jacket. "All right!" he cried. "We might as well have it over now! Here, you, Smith!"

And he shot Smith through the chest. Smith fell. The other men cried out, there was much blundering, a rushing about, confusion. They broke apart. Johnson aimed and fired twice more.

"Stop!" cried Mark.

New York soared up around them, out of rock and cave and sky. Sun glinted on high towers. The elevated thundered, tugs blew in the harbor. The green lady stared across the bay, a torch in her hand.

"Look, you fools!" shouted Mark, hoping to trick them out of their insanity. Central Park broke out constellations of spring blossom. The wind blew fresh cut lawn smells over them in a wave.

And in the center of New York, bewildered, milling, the men stumbled, Mark cried out, Johnson fired his gun three times more. Saul ran forward, leaping. He crashed against Johnson, bore him down, wrenched the gun away. It fired again.

The men stopped milling.

They stood. Saul lay across Johnson. They ceased struggling.

There was a terrible silence. The men stood watching.

New York sank down into the sea. With a hissing, bubbling, sighing, with a lost cry of ruined metal and old time, the great structures leaned, warped, flowed, collapsed.

Mark stood among the buildings. Then, like a building, a neat red hole drilled into his chest, wordless, he fell.

Saul lay staring at the men, at the body.

He got up, the gun in his hand.

Johnson did not move, was afraid to move.

They all shut their eyes and opened them again, thinking that by so doing they might reanimate the man who lay before them.

The cave was cold. The silence complete. The day was drawing to a close. The day had passed swiftly with their arguments and wildnesses. Now the night wind was rising.

Saul stood up and looked at the gun in his hand, remotely. He took it and threw it far out over the valley and did not watch it fall.

The men moved in around Mark, like figures in a dream.

They looked down at the body as if they could not believe it. Saul bent down and took hold of the limp hand. "Leonard!" he asked, softly. "Leonard?" He shook the hand. "Leonard!"

Leonard Mark did not move. His eyes were shut, his chest had ceased going up and down. He was getting cold, rapidly.

Saul got up. "We've killed him," he said, not looking at the men. He looked at the sky and green Earth rising in the east.

"We've killed him." His mouth was filling with a raw liquor now. "The only one we didn't want to kill we killed." He put his shaking hand to his eyes. The other men stood waiting.

"Get a spade," said Saul. "Bury him." He turned away. "I'll have nothing to do with you." Somebody moved off to find a spade.

SAUL was so weak he couldn't move. His legs were grown into the earth, with roots feeding deep of loneliness and fear and the cold of the night. The fire had died

almost out and now there was only the double moonlight riding over the blue mountains.

There was the sound of someone digging in the earth with a spade, making a hole.

"We don't need him, anyhow," said somebody, much too loudly.

"Shut up!" cried Saul, whirling around. "Or I'll kill you, kill you, too, and bury you down in with him! One more word from you, you liar, and I will!"

The sound of digging went on. Saul walked off slowly and let himself slide down the side of a dark tree until he reached and was sitting blankly on the sand, his hands blindly in his lap.

Sleep, he thought. We'll all go to sleep now. We have that much, anyway. Go to sleep and try to dream of New York and all the rest.

He closed his eyes, wearily, the blood gathering in his nose and his mouth and in his quivering eyes.

"How did he do it?" he asked in a tired voice. His head fell forward on his chest. "How did he bring New York up here and make us walk around in it. Let's try. It shouldn't be too hard. Think! Think of New York," he whispered, falling down into sleep. "New York and Central Park and then Illinois in the spring, apple blossoms and green grass."

It didn't work. It wasn't the same. New York was gone and nothing he could do would bring it back. He would rise every morning and walk on the dead sea looking for it, and walk forever around Mars looking for it and never find it. And finally lie, too tired to walk, trying to find New York in his head, but not finding it. Not finding it ever!

The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was the spade rising and falling and digging a hole into which, with a tremendous crash of metal and golden mist and odor and color and sound, New York collapsed, fell and was buried.

He cried all night in his sleep.

Olympic Gadgetry

THE advent of science increasingly in modern life is well indicated by the extent to which modern wizardry was used in the Olympic games at London last summer. All sorts of trickery was employed to make judging of winners in track and field and water events not a matter of unreliable human sensitivity but of unshakable automatic devices.

Photo-finish cameras, of course, made winners of all running events beyond dispute. Strategically placed at the finish lines they recorded each contestant in his proper order as he finished his race, thus outlawing the disputes that have, in the past, caused so much international bad feeling. Prints of the tape-breakings reached the hands of the judges within 90 seconds after the races were run.

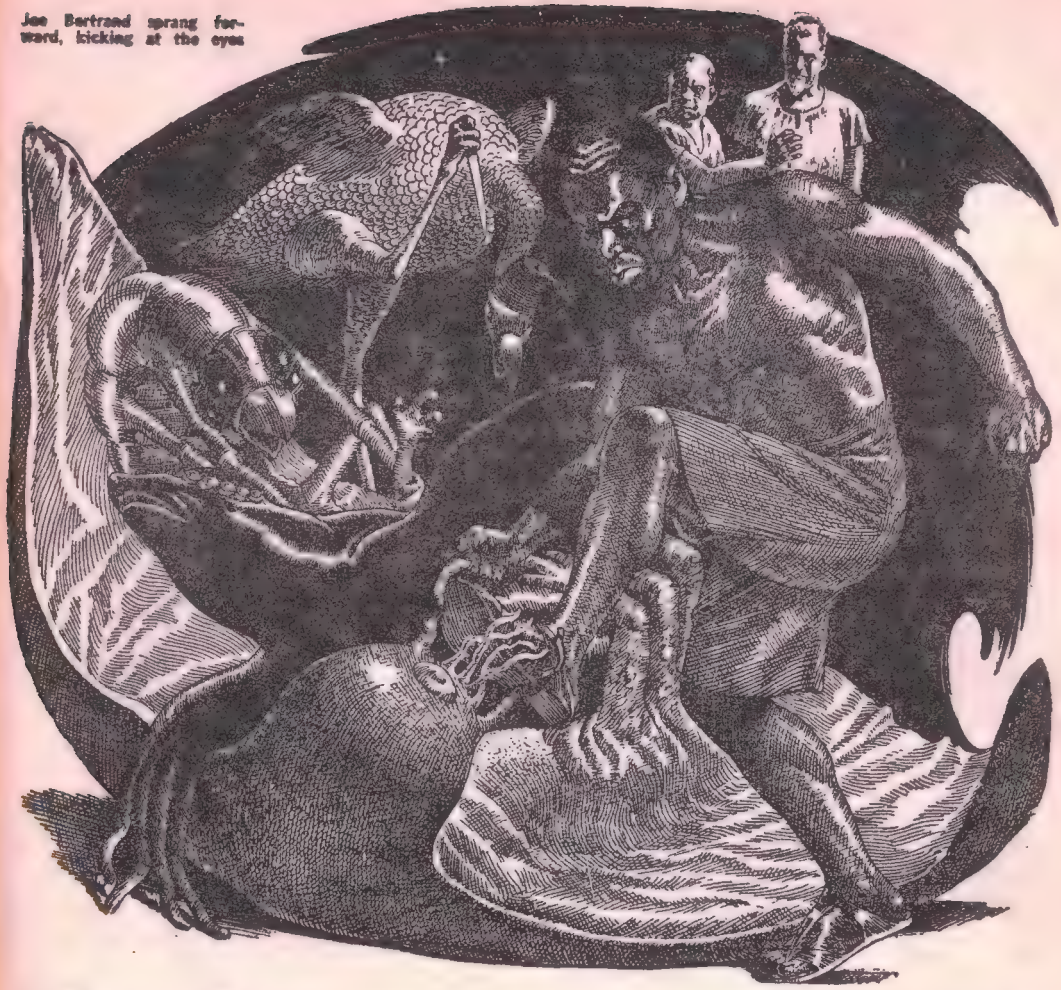
Aluminum non-sag bars were used in the pole vault and the bars were replaced mechanically after being knocked off—thus eliminating all sorts of precarious ladder climbing by officials. Moulding sand recorded exactly the heel prints of broad jumpers and a gadget like the "tilt" sign in pinball machines recorded overstepping fouls in this and other field events.

In races like the 400 meter event, which start on the curve of the track, a remote control firing device enabled all runners to hear the starting gun simultaneously. Formerly, thanks to the spacing of the different running lanes to compensate for the curve, some contestants were 150 feet from the gun and heard it a full tenth of a second after luckier contestants. And in rowing events an electric timing setup made judgment almost infallible.

Maybe, someday, we'll have mechanical runners like the rabbits at the dog tracks—in which case our athletes can take things easy here at home by their television sets. It's something to think about.

—*Matt Lee*

Joe Bertrand sprang forward, kicking at the eyes



The Unspeakable McInch

By JACK VANCE

Magnus Ridolph runs up against old-fashioned earth-style graft when he becomes a troubleshooter in Sclerotto City!

"MYSTERY" is a word with no objective opposite, merely describing the limitations of a mind. In fact a mind may be classified by the order of the phenomena it considers mysterious. . . . The mystery is resolved, the solution made known. "Of course, it is obvious!" comes the chorus. A word about the obvious: it is always obvious. . . . The common mind transposes the sequence, letting the mystery generate the solution. This is logic in reverse; actually the mystery relates to the solution as the foam relates to the beer. . . .

—*Magnus Ridolph.*

THE Uni-Culture Mission had said simply, "His name's McInch, he's a murderer. That's all we know."

Magnus Ridolph would have refused the

commission had his credit balance stood at its usual level. But the collapse of an advertising venture—sky-writing with luminescent gases across interplanetary space—had left the white-bearded philosopher in near-destitution.

A first impression of Sclerotto Planet reinforced his distaste for the job. The light from the two suns—red and blue—struck discordantly at his eyes. The sluggish ocean, the crazy clutter of slab-sided rock suggested no repose, and Sclerotto City, a wretched maze of cabins and shacks, promised no entertainment. Finally his host, Klemmer Boek, chaplain-in-charge of the Uni-Culture Mission, greeted him with little warmth—in fact seemed to resent his presence as if it were due to some private officiousness of Magnus Ridolph's own.

They rode in a battered old car up to the Mission, perched high on a shoulder of naked stone, and the dim interior was refreshingly cool after the dust and dazzle of the ride.

Magnus Ridolph took a folded handkerchief from his pocket, patted his forehead, his distinguished nose, his neat white beard. To his host he turned a quizzical glance.

"I'm afraid I find the illumination disturbing. Blue, red—three different shadows for every stick and stone."

"I'm used to it," said Klemmer Boek tonelessly. He was a short man, with a melon-sized paunch pressing out the front of his tunic. His face was pink and glazed, like cheap chinaware, with round blue eyes and a short lumpy nose. "I hardly remember what Earth looks like."

"The tourist guide," said Magnus Ridolph, replacing the handkerchief, "describes the effect as 'stimulating and exotic'. It must be that I am unperceptive."

Boek snorted. "The tourist guide? It calls Sclerotto City 'colorful, fascinating, a commonwealth-in-miniature, a concrete example of interplanetary democracy in action'. I wish the man who wrote that eyewash had to live here as long as I have!"

He pulled out a rattan chair for Magnus Ridolph, poured ice-water into a glass. Magnus Ridolph settled himself into the chair and Boek sank into another opposite.

"Now then," said Magnus Ridolph, "who or what is McInch?"

Boek smiled bitterly. "That's what you're here for."

Magnus Ridolph airily glanced across the room, lit a cigar, said nothing.

"After six years," said Boek presently, "all I know about McInch I can tell you in six seconds. First—he's boss over that entire stinking welter out there." He gestured at the city. "Second, he's a murderer, a self-seeking scoundrel. Third, no-one but McInch knows who McInch is."

Magnus Ridolph arose, walked to the window, depolarized it, looked out over the ramshackle roofs, stretching like a tattered Persian rug to Magnetic Bay. His gaze wandered to the shark-tooth crags stabbing the sky opposite, down the bay to where it opened into the tideless ocean, out to a horizon shrouded in lavender haze.

"Unprepossessing. I fail to understand how it attracts visitors."

BOEK joined him at the window. "Well—it's a strange world, certainly." He nodded at the roofs below. "Down in that confusion live at least a dozen different types of intelligent creatures—expatriates, exiles, fugitives—all crowded together cheek by jowl. Unquestionably it's amazing, the adjustments they've made to each other."

"Hm . . ." said Magnus Ridolph noncomittally. Then: "This McInch—is he a man?"

Boek shrugged. "No one knows. And anyone who finds out dies almost at once. Twice Headquarters has sent out key men to investigate. Both of them dropped dead in the middle of town—one by the Export Warehouse, the other in the Mayor's office."

Magnus Ridolph coughed slightly.

"And the cause of their deaths?"

"Unclassified disease." Bock stared down at the roofs, the walls, lanes, arcades below. "The Mission tries to stand apart from local politics, though naturally in rubbing alien noses into Earth culture we're propagandizing our own system of life. And sometimes—" he grinned sourly— "circumstances like McInch arise."

"Of course," said Magnus Ridolph. "Just what form do McInch's depredations take?"

"Graft," said Boek. "Graft, pure and simple. Old-fashioned Earth-style civic corruption. I should have mentioned—" another sour grin for Magnus Ridolph—"but Sclerotto City has a duly elected mayor, and a group of civic officers. There's a fire department, a postal service, a garbage disposal unit, police force—wait till you see 'em!" He chuckled, a noise like a bucket

scraping on a stone floor. "That's actually what brings the tourists—the way these creatures go about making a living Earth-style."

Magnus Ridolph bent forward slightly, a furrow appearing in his forehead. "There seems to be no ostentation, no buildings of pretension—other than that one there by the bay."

"That's the tourist hotel," said Boek. "The Pondicherry House."

"Ah, I see," said Magnus Ridolph abstractedly. "I admit that at first sight Sclerotto City's form of government seems improbable."

"It becomes more sensible when you think of the city's history," said Boek. "Fifty years ago, a colony of Ordinationalists was founded here—the only flat spot on the planet. Gradually—Sclerotto hangs just about outside the Commonwealth and no questions asked—misfits from everywhere in the cluster accumulated, and one way or another found means to survive. Those who failed—" he waved his hand—"merely didn't survive.

"When you come upon it fresh, like the tourists, it's astounding. The first time I walked down the main street, I thought I was having a nightmare. The Kmaush, in tanks, secreting pearls in their gizzards . . . centipedes from Portmar's Planet, the Tau Geminis, the Armadillos from Carnegie Twelve . . . Yellowbirds, Zeeks, even a few Aldebaranese—not to mention several types of anthropoids. How they get along without tearing each other to pieces still bothers me once in a while."

"The difficulty is perhaps more apparent than real," said Mangus Ridolph, his voice taking on a certain resonance.

Boek glanced sidewise at his guest, curled his lip. "You haven't lived here as long as I have." He turned his eyes back down to Sclerotto City. "With that dust, that smell, that . . ." he struggled for a word.

"In any event," said Magnus Ridolph, "these are all intelligent creatures. . . . Just a few more questions. First, how does McInch collect his graft?"

BOEK returned to his own chair, leaned back heavily. "Apparently he helps himself outright to city funds. The municipal taxes are collected in cash, taken to the city hall and locked in a safe. McInch merely opens the safe when he finds himself short, takes what he needs, closes the safe again."

"And the citizens do not object?"

"Indignation is an emotion," said Boek with heavy sarcasm. "The bulk of the population are non-human, and don't have emotions."

"And those of the population that are men, and therefore can know indignation?"

"Being men—they're afraid."

Magnus Ridolph stroked his beard gently. "Let me put it this way. Do the citizens show any reluctance toward paying their taxes?"

"They have no choice," said Boek. "All the imports and exports are handled by a municipal cooperative. Taxes are assessed there."

"Why isn't the safe moved, or guarded?"

"That's been tried—by our late mayor. The guards he posted were also found dead. Unclassifiable disease."

"In all probability," said Magnus Ridolph, McInch is one of the city officials. They would be the first to be exposed to temptation."

"I agree with you," said Boek. "But which one?"

"How many are there?"

"Well—there's the postmaster, a Portmar multipede. There's the fire-chief, a man; the chief of police, a Sirius Fifth; the garbage collector, he's a—a—I can't think of the name. From 1012 Aurigae."

"A Golespod?"

"That's right. He's the only one of them in the city. Then there's the manager of the municipal warehouse, who is also the tax collector—one of the Tau Gemini ant-things—and last but not least, there's the Mayor. His name is Juju Jeejee—that's what it sounds like to me. He's a Yellowbird."

"I see. . . ."

After a pause Boek said, "Well, what do you think?"

"The problem has points of interest," admitted Magnus Ridolph. "Naturally I want to look around the city."

Boek looked at his watch. "When would you like to go?"

"I'll change my linen," said Magnus Ridolph, rising to his feet. "Then, if it's convenient to you, we'll look around at once."

"You understand now," said Boek gruffly, "the minute you start asking questions about McInch, McInch knows it and he'll try to kill you."

"The Uni-Culture Mission is paying me

a large fee to take that chance," declared Magnus Ridolph. "I am, so to speak, a latter-day gladiator. Logic is my sword, vigilance is my shield. And also," he touched his short well-tended beard, "I will wear air-filters up my nostrils, and will spray myself with antiseptic. To complete my precautions, I'll carry a small germicidal radiator."

"Gladiator, eh?" snorted Boek. "You're more like a turtle. Well, how long before you'll be ready?"

"If you'll show me my quarters," said Magnus Ridolph, "I'll be with you in half an hour."

IN GLOOMY triumph Boek said, "There's all that's left of the Ordinationalists."

Magnus Ridolph looked at the cubical stone building. Small dunes of gray dust lay piled against the walls, the door gaped into blankness.

"At that, it's the solidest building in Sclerotto," said Boek.

"A wonder McInch hasn't moved in," observed Magnus Ridolph.

"It's now the municipal dump. The garbage collector has his offices behind. I'll show you, if you like. It's one of the sights. Er—by the way, are you incognito?"

"No," said Magnus Ridolph. "I think not. I see no special need for subterfuge."

"Just as you like," said Boek, jumping out of the car. He watched with pursed lips as Magnus Ridolph soberly donned a gleaming sun-helmet, adjusted his nasal air-filters and dark glasses.

They plowed through fine gray dust, which, disturbed by their steps, rose into the dual sunlight in whorls of red, blue and a hundred intermediate shades.

Magnus Ridolph suddenly tilted his head. Boek grinned. "Quite a smell, isn't it? Almost call it a stink, wouldn't you?"

"I would indeed," assented Magnus Ridolph. "What in the name of Pluto are we approaching?"

"It's the garbage collector—the Golespod. Actually, he doesn't collect the garbage, the citizens bring it here and throw it on him. He absorbs it."

They circled the ancient Ordinationalist church, and Magnus Ridolph now saw that the back wall had been battered open, permitting the occupant light and air, but shading him from the two suns. This, the Golespod, was a wide rubbery creature, somwhat like a giant ray, though blockier, thicker in cross-section. It had a number of pale short legs on its underside, a blank milk-blue eye on its front, a row of pliant tendrils dangling under the eye. It crouched half-submerged in semi-solid rottenness—scraps of food, fish entrails, organic refuse of every sort.

"He gets paid for it," said Boek. "The pay is all velvet, as his board and room are thrown in with the job."

A rhythmic shuffling sound came to their ears. Around the corner of the old stone church came a snakelike creature suspended on thirty skinny jointed legs.

"That's one of the mail carriers," said Boek. "They're all multipedes—and pretty good at it too."

THE creature was long, wiry, and his body shone a burnished copper-red. He had a flat caterpillar face, four black shiny eyes, a small horny beak. A tray hung under his body containing letters and small parcels. One of these latter he seized with a foot, whistled shrilly. The Golespod grunted, flung back its front, tossing the trailing tentacles away from a black maw underneath.

The multipede tossed the little parcel into the mouth, and with a bright blank stare at Boek and Magnus Ridolph, turned in a supple arc and trundled around the building. The Golespod grunted, honked, burrowed deeper into the filth, where it lay staring at Boek and Magnus Ridolph—these two returning the scrutiny with much the same detached, faintly contemptuous, curiosity.

"Does he understand human speech?" inquired Magnus Ridolph.

Boek nodded. "But don't go too near him. He's an irascible brute."

Magnus Ridolph took a cautious step or two forward, looked into the milky blue eye.

"I'm trying to identify a criminal named McInch. Can you help me?"

The black body moved in sudden agitation, and a furious honking came from the pale under-body. The eye distended, swelled. Boek cocked an ear.

"It's saying, 'Go away, go away'."

Magnus Ridolph said, "You are unable to help me then?"

The creature redoubled its angry demonstrations, suddenly lurched back, flung up its head, spewed a gout of vile-smelling fluid. Magnus Ridolph jumped nimbly back, but a

few drops struck his tunic, inundated him with a choking fetor.

Boek watched with an undisguised smile as Magnus Ridolph scrubbed at the spot with his handkerchief. "It'll wear off after a while."

"Umph," said Magnus Ridolph.

They returned through the dust to the car.

"I'll take you to the Export Warehouse," said Boek. "That's about the center of town, and we can go on foot from there. You can see more on foot."

To either side of the street now, the shacks and small shops, built of slate and split dried seaweed stalks, pressed ever closer, and life clotted more thickly about them. Human children, grimed and ragged, played in the street with near-featureless Capella-anthropoids young, immature Carnegie Twelve Armadillos, Martian frog-children.

Hundreds of small Portman multipedes darted underfoot like lizards, most of whom would be killed by their parents for reasons never quite understood by men. Yellowbirds—ostrichlike bipeds with soft yellow scales—strode quietly through the crowd, heads raised high, eyes rolled up. Like a parade of monsters in a dipsomaniac's delirium passed the population of Sclerotto City.

Stalls at either side of the street displayed simple goods—baskets, pans, a thousand utensiles whose use only the seller and the buyer knew. Other shops sold what loosely might be termed food—fruits and canned goods for men, hard brown capsules for the Yellowbirds, squirming red worm-things for the Aldebaranese. And Magnus Ridolph noticed here and there little knots of tourists, for the most part natives of Earth, peering, talking, laughing, pointing.

Boek pulled his car up to a long corrugated-metal shed, and again they stepped out into the dust.

THE warehouse was full of a hushed murmur. Scores of tourists walked about, buying trinkets—carved rock, elaborately patterned fabrics, nacreous jewels that were secreted in the bellies of the Kmaush, perfumes pressed from seaweed, statuettes, tiny aquaria in sealed globes, with a microscopic lens through which could be seen weirdly beautiful seascapes peopled with infusoria, tiny sponges, corals, darting squids, infinitestimal fish. Behind loomed bales of the planet's staple exports: seaweed resin, split dried seaweed for surfacing veneer, sacks of rare metallic salts.

"There's the warehouse manager," said Boek, nodding toward an antlike creature standing waist high on six legs. It had doglike eyes, a pelt of satiny gray fur, a relatively short thick thorax. "Do you want to meet him? He can talk, understand you. Mind like an adding-machine."

Interpreting Magnus Ridolph's silence as assent, Boek threaded the aisles to the Tau Gemini insect-thing.

"I can't introduce you," said Boek jovially —Magnus Ridolph noticed that he assumed affability like a cloak in the presence of the town's citizens—"because the manager here has no name."

"On my planet," said the insect in a droning accentless voice, "we are marked by chords, as you call them. Mine is—" a quick series of tones came from the two flaps near the base of his head.

"This is Magnus Ridolph, representing the Mission Headquarters."

"I'm interested," said Magnus Ridolph, "in identifying the criminal known as McInch. Can you help me?"

"I'm sorry," came the ant-creature's even vibrations. "I have heard the name. I am aware of his thefts. I do not know who he is."

Magnus Ridolph bowed.

"I'll take you to the fire-chief," said Boek.

The fire-chief was a tall blue-eyed Negro with dull bronze hair, wearing only a pair of knee-length scarlet trousers. Boek and Magnus Ridolph found him at an observation tower near the central square, with one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. He nodded to Boek.

"Joe, a friend of mine from home," said Boek. "Mr. Magnus Ridolph, Mr. Joe Bertrand, our fire-chief."

The fire-chief darted a swift surprised glance at Magnus Ridolph, at Boek, and back again. "How do you do," he said as they shook hands. "I think I've heard your name somewhere before."

"It's an uncommon name," said Magnus Ridolph, "but I presume there are other Ridolphs in the Commonwealth."

Boek looked from one to the other, shifted his weight on his short legs, sighed, looked off down the street.

"Not many Magnus Ridolphs, though," said the fire-chief.

"Very few," agreed the white-bearded sage.

"I suppose you're after McInch."

"I am. Can you help me?"

"I know nothing about him. I don't want to. It's healthier."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I see. Thank you, in any event."

BOEK jerked his plump thumb at a tall building built of woven seaweed panels between bleached bone-white poles. "That's the city hall," he said. The Mayor lives upstairs, where he can, *ha, ha,* guard the city funds."

"Just what are his other duties?" Magnus Ridolph asked, gently beating the dust from the front of his tunic.

"He meets all the tourist ships, walks around town wearing a red fez. He's the local magistrate, and then he's in charge of town funds and pays the municipal salaries. Personally I don't think he's got the brains to be McInch."

"I'd like to see the safe that McInch is so free with," said Magnus Ridolph.

They pushed through a flimsy creaking door, into a long low room. The seaweed panelling of the walls was old, worn, shot with cracks, and each crack admitted twin rays of light, these painting twin red and blue images on the floor. The safe bulked against the opposite side of the room, an antique steel box with button combination.

A long yellow-scaled neck pushed down through a hole in the ceiling, and a flat head topped by a ridiculous little red fez turned a purple eye at them. A sleek yellow body followed the head, landing on thin flexible legs.

"Hello there, Mayor," said Boek heartily. "A man from Mission Headquarters—Mr. Ridolph, our Mayor, Juju Jeejee."

"Pleased-to-meet-you," said the Mayor shrilly. "Would you like my autograph?"

"Certainly," said Magnus Ridolph. "I'd be delighted."

The Mayor ducked his head between his legs, plucked a card from a body pouch. The characters were unintelligible to Magnus Ridolph.

"That is my name in the script of my native planet. The translation is roughly 'Enchanting Vibration'."

"Thank you," said Magnus Ridolph. "I'll treasure this memento of Sclerotto. By the way, I'm here to apprehend the creature known as McInch—" The Mayor gave a sharp squawk, darted its head back and forth. "—and thought that perhaps you might be able to assist me."

The Mayor wove his neck in a series of S's. "No, no, no," he piped, "I know nothing, I am the Mayor."

Boek glanced at Magnus Ridolph, who nodded.

"Well, we'll be leaving, Mayor," said Boek. "I wanted my friend to meet you."

"Delighted," rasped the Mayor, and tensing his legs, hopped up through the hole in the ceiling.

A hundred yards through the red and blue shimmer brought them to the jail, a long barracks built of slate. The cells faced directly out on the street. Visible were the disconsolate head of a Yellowbird, the blank face of a Capella anthropoid, a man who stared as Boek and Magnus Ridolph passed, and spit speculatively into the dust.

"And what are their sins?" inquired Magnus Ridolph.

"The man stole some roofing; the Yellowbird assaulted a young Portmar centipede; the Capellan, I don't know. The chief of police—a Sirius Fifth—has his office behind."

THE office was a tentlike lean-to, the chief of police an enormous torpedo-shaped amphibian. His flippers ended in long maniples, his skin was black and shiny, he smelled sickly-sweet. A ring of beady deep-sunk eyes completely circled his head.

When Boek and Magnus Ridolph—both perspiring, dirty and tired—appeared around the corner of the lean-to, he rose quivering and swaying on springy foot-flippers, drew one of his flippers across his barrel. Where the fingers had passed words sprang out on the black hide in startling white.

"Good-day, Mr. Boek. Good-day, sir."

"Hello, Fritz," said Boek. "Just passing through, showing my friend the town."

The amphibian lay back in his trough-shaped seat. The flippers passed along his barrel, the first message having faded.

"Anything I can show you?"

"I'm trying to find McInch," said Magnus Ridolph. "Can you help me?"

The flippers hesitated, fluttered across the barrel. "I know nothing. I will assist you in every official manner."

Magnus Ridolph nodded, turned slowly away. "I'll let you know when and if I

discover anything."

"Now," said Boek, coughing, clearing his throat of dust, "there's the post-office." He turned, looked back toward the Export Warehouse. "I think it's about as short to walk as it is to reurn for the car."

Magnus Ridolph glanced up at the two suns in the sea-green sky. "Does it cool off during the evening?"

"To some extent," said Boek, stepping forward doggedly. "We want to be back at the Mission by sunset. I never feel quite easy out after dark. Especially now, with McInch." He pursed his plump mouth.

Their path took them between the rickety shacks toward the waterfront. Life swarmed everywhere, life of the most disparate sorts. Through the windows and doors they saw quiet unnamed bulks, other shapes, agile and quick. Eyes of a dozen different kinds watched them, sounds never heard on Earth met their ears, smells never intended for earthly nostrils drifted across the roadway.

The scene around them gradually assumed a redder tone, as the blue sun sank lower toward the horizon. As they reached the post-office—a slate shed adjacent to the space-port, it dropped below the horizon and vanished.

If Magnus Ridolph expected interest and enthusiasm for his mission from the Postmaster, a Portmar centipede, he was disappointed. They found him sorting mail—standing on half his legs, rhythmically pigeon-holing letters with those remaining.

He paused in his work while Boek introduced Magnus Ridolph, stared at the detective with the impersonal uninterested gaze to which Magnus Ridolph was becoming accustomed, and disavowed any knowledge of McInch.

Magnus Ridolph glanced at Boek, said, "Excuse me, Mr. Boek, I'd like to ask the Postmaster one or two confidential questions."

"Certainly," sniffed Boek, and moved away.

Magnus Ridolph presently rejoined him.

"I wanted to find out what type of mail the civic officers received, and also any other circumstances he might have noted which would help me."

"And did he help you?"

"Very much," said Magnus Ridolph.

THE two men skirted the waterfront, where giant seaweed barges loomed dark at their moorings, then back toward the Export Warehouse. The red sun was close to the horizon when they finally reached the car, and blood-colored light gave the town an aspect of fabled antiquity, softening the clutter and squalor. Silently they drove up the bumpy road to the Mission at the top of the ridge.

As they alighted, Magnus Ridolph turned to Boek.

"Have you a microscope conveniently at hand?"

"Three," said Boek shortly. "Visual, electronic, gamma-beta."

"I'd like to use one of them tonight," said Magnus Ridolph.

"As you wish."

"Tomorrow I believe that, one way or another, we shall clear up the affair."

Boek stared at him curiously. "You think you know who McInch is?"

"It was immediately obvious," said Magnus Ridolph, "in the light of my special knowledge."

Boek clamped his jaw. "I'd bolt my door tonight, if I were you. Whoever he is—he's a murderer."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I believe you're right."

Sclerotto night was long at this season—fourteen hours—and Magnus Ridolph arose, bathed, dressed himself in a clean white and blue tunic, all before dawn.

From the windows of the reception hall he stood watching for the sunrise, the sky as yet holding only a blue electric glare, when he heard a tread behind him.

Turning he found Klemmer Boek watching him, the round head twisted to one side, the blue eyes full of brittle speculation.

"Sleep well?" was Boek's greeting.

"Indeed I did," said Magnus Ridolph. "I hope you slept as soundly."

Boek grunted. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Quite ready," said Magnus Ridolph. They passed into the dining room, and Boek ordered breakfast from his lone servant.

They ate silently, the blue pre-dawn light growing ever stronger. Only after coffee did Magnus Ridolph lean back, expansively light a small cigar.

"Still think you can settle the case today?" asked Boek.

"Yes," said Magnus Ridolph, "I think it's very possible."

"Er—you know who McInch is?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"And can you prove it?"

Magnus Ridolph let a plume of cigar smoke curl up through his fingers into the first watery ray from the sapphire-blue sun. "After a fashion—yes."

"You don't sound very assured."

"Well—I have a stratagem in mind which will save us a great deal of time."

"Yes?" said Boek, with heavy sarcasm, drumming his fingers.

"I would like you to have Mayor—ah, Juju? . . . call a meeting this afternoon of the city officials. The city hall would be a satisfactory place. And at the meeting we will discuss McInch."

AS THEY plowed through the dust to the city hall, Boek snapped "This seems a little melodramatic."

"Possibly, possibly," said Magnus Ridolph. "Possibly dangerous also."

Boek hesitated in midstride. "Are you sure—"

"Nothing is a certainty," said Magnus Ridolph. "Not even the continued rotation of this planet on its axis. And the least predictable phenomena I know of is the duration of a life."

Boek looked straight ahead, said nothing.

They entered the city hall, paused in the ante-room a moment to let their eyes adapt to the dimness. Ahead of them to right and left, bulks of different masses and shapes began to form, splotched here and there by the rays of red and blue which entered through the matting.

"The garbage collector is here," said Magnus Ridolph behind his hand to Boek. "I can smell him."

They advanced into the central room. The Mayor had been pacing solemnly back and forth, red fez perched slantwise, in the center of a rough circle formed by the Golespod garbage-collector, the multipede postmaster, Joe Bertrand the firechief, the Tau Gemini warehouse manager, and the amphibian Chief of Police.

"Gentlemen," said Magnus Ridolph, "I won't take up much of your time. As you all know, I have been investigating that entity known as McInch."

There was movement about the room—a twinkling of the multipede postmaster's legs, a quiver on the police-chief's rubbery hide, a twist of the Mayor's neck. There were slight nervous sounds—a soft hiss from the skatelike Golespod, the Negro fire-chief clearing his throat.

The warehouse manager—the ant-like creature of Tau Gemini—spoke in his toneless voice. "Exactly why are we here? Make your purpose clear."

Magnus Ridolph serenely stroked his beard, glanced from creature to creature. "I have learned McInch's identity. I have estimated the sum he costs Sclerotto every day. I can prove that this creature is a murderer, or at the very least that he attempted to murder me. Yes, me—Magnus Ridolph!" and Magnus Ridolph stood stiff and stern as he spoke.

Again there was the guarded movement, the near-silent eddy of sound, as each of the creatures took itself into the familiar places of its own brain.

MAGNUS RIDOLPH said gravely, "As the governing body of the community I would value your advice on what course of action I should follow. Mr. Mayor, have you a suggestion?"

The Yellowbird wove its neck in a series of quick darts and plunges, piped a shrill series of excited unintelligible tones. The head came to a stand-still, the purple eye stared craftily at Magnus Ridolph. "McInch might kill us all."

Boek cleared his throat, muttered uncomfortably, "Do you think it's a good idea for us to . . ."

Fire-chief Joe Bertrand said, "I'm sick of all this pussy-footing. We have a jail. We have a legal code. Let's judge McInch by what he's done. If he's a thief, put him in jail. If he's a murderer, and if he can take mental surgery, let's give it to him. If he can't, let's execute him!"

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I can prove McInch is a thief. Several years in jail might prove a salutary experience. You have a clean sanitary jail, with germicidal air-filters, compulsory bathing, pure, sanitary food—"

"Why do you emphasize the wholesomeness of the jail?" buzzed the warehouse manager.

"Because McInch will be exposed to it," said Mangus Ridolph solemnly. "He'll be vaccinated and immunized, and live in a completely germ-free environment. And this will hurt McInch more than death. Now," and he looked at the metal-tense figures around him, "who is McInch?"

The garbage-collector reared amazingly

erect, leaning far back, revealing its pale underbody, its double row of pale short legs. It writhed, hunched. "Duck!" yelled Boek as the Golespod spat a stinking wash of liquid to all quarters of the room. From the depths of its body came a rumbling voice. "Now all die, all die. . . ."

"Quiet!" said Magnus Ridolph sharply. "Quiet everyone! Mayor, quiet please!"

The Yellowbird's crazed piping diminished. "There is no danger for anyone," said Magnus Ridolph, cooly wiping his face, eyes upon the Golespod, who still reared back. "An ultra-sonic vibrator below the floor, a Hecthmann irradiator in the ceiling have been operating ever since we entered the room. The bacteria in McInch's serum were dead as soon as they left his mouth, if not before."

The Golespod hissed, lowered himself, plunged for the door, little legs pumping like pistons. The chief of police lunged like a porpoise from a wave, landed on the Golespod's flat writhing back. His clawed flippers hooked in the flesh, tore. The Golespod screamed, turned on its back, scraped the amphibian between its legs, folded itself around him, squeezed. Joe Bertrand sprang forward, kicking at the milk-blue eye. The Portmar centipede rippled into the mêlée, and with each of his slender feet seized one of the Golespod's, strained to pull them aside from the constricted chief of police. The Mayor hopped up through the hole in the ceiling, hopped back with a skewer, stabbed, stabbed, stabbed. . . .

BOEK staggered out to the car. Magnus Ridolph, throwing his stinking white and blue tunic into a ditch, joined him.

Boek clung to the wheel, his pink face clabbered.

"They—they tore him to pieces," he whispered.

"An unnerving spectacle," said Magnus Ridolph, testing his clotted beard. "A sordid adventure in every respect."

Boek turned a round accusing eye at him. "I believe you planned it like that!"

Magnus Ridolph said, gently, "My friend, may I suggest that we return to the Mission and bathe ourselves? I believe clean clothes would help restore our perspectives."

A sober Klemmer Boek sat across from Magnus Ridolph at the dinner table, a Klemmer Boek who barely looked at his food. Magnus Ridolph ate fastidiously, though substantially. Once again he wore crisp linen, and his white beard was soft, expertly trimmed.

"But how," blurted Boek, "did you know the garbage-collector was McInch?"

"A simple process," said Magnus Ridolph, gesturing with his fork. "A perfectly straightforward sequence of logic; a framework of theory, the consulting of references—"

"Yes, yes, yes," muttered Boek. "Logic this, intelligence that. . . ."

Magnus Ridolph's mouth twitched slightly. "Here, in the concrete, is my chain of thought. McInch is a grafter, a thief, stealing large sums of money. What does he do with his loot? Nothing very conspicuous, otherwise his identity would be common knowledge. Assuming that McInch spent some or all of his money—an assumption by no means sure—I considered each of the civic officials, the most likely suspects, from the viewpoint of one of his own race.

"There was Joe Bertrand, the fire-chief. By this test, he was innocent. He lived frugally in an uncongenial environment.

I considered the Mayor. What was a Yellowbird's definition of delight? I found it would include a field of a certain type of flower, the scent of which drugs and exalts the Yellowbirds. Nothing of this sort was evident on Sclerotto. The Mayor, in his own eyes, lived a meager life.

"Next the warehouse manager, the Tau Gemini ant-creature. The wants of these individuals are very modest. The words 'luxury' and 'leisure' have no equivalents in their language. If for this reason alone I was tempted to drop him. I learned from the postmaster that he purchased a number of books every month—these were his only conspicuous indulgence—but their value was commensurate with his salary. Temporarily, at least, I dismissed the warehouse manager.

"The chief of police—a decisive case. By nature he is an amphibian, accustomed to a diet of mollusks. His planet is marshy and dank. Contrast all this to his life here on Sclerotto. A wonder he is able to survive.

"I wondered about the postmaster—the multipede from Protmar's Planet. His concept of luxury is a deep tank of warm oil, massage by little animals captured and trained for that purpose. This treatment bleaches the skin to a sandy beige. The postmaster's skin is horny and brick-red, a sign of poverty and neglect.

"Consider the garbage collector. The human reaction to his way of life is disgust, contempt. We cannot believe that a creature wallowing in filth possesses subtle discriminations. However I knew that the Golespods possess an internal sense of the most delicate precision. They exist by ingesting organic matter, allowing it to ferment under the action of bacteria in a series of stomachs, and the ensuing alcohol they oxidize for energy.

"Now the composition or quality of the organic raw materials is of no concern to the Golespod—garbage, protein waste, carrion, it's all one, just as we ignore slight variations in the air we breathe. They derive their enjoyment not from these raw materials, but from the internal products—and to these ends, the variety and blends of bacteria in their stomachs is all-important.

"Over the course of thousands of years, the Golespods have become bacteriologists of an extremely high order. They have isolated millions of various types, created new strains, each invoking in them a different sensual response. The most prized strains are difficult to isolate and hence are expensive.

"When I learned this, I knew that the garbage-collector was McInch. In his own mind he was in a supremely enviable position—surrounded by unlimited quantities of organic materials, able to afford the rarest, most enticing blends of bacteria.

"I learned from the postmaster that the Golespod indeed received a small parcel from every incoming mail-ship—these of course the bacteria he imported from his home planet, some fantastically expensive."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH leaned back now, sipped his coffee, watching his wan host over the rim. Boek stirred. "How—how did he kill the two investigators then?" he asked. "And you said he tried to kill you."

"Do you recall how he spat at me yesterday? When I returned to the Mission I examined the stain under your miscroscope. It was a thick blanket of dead bacteria. I could not identify them, but luckily my precautions had killed them." He sipped his coffee, puffed his cigar. "Now, as for my fee, I believe you received instructions in that connection."

Boek rose heavily, walked to his desk, returned with a check.

"Thank you," said Magnus Ridolph, gazing at the figure. He tapped his fingers musingly on the table. "So Sclerotto City finds itself without a garbage collector. . . ."

Boek scowled. "And no prospect of finding one. The city'll stink worse than ever."

Magnus Ridolph had been languidly stroking his beard, gazing thoughtfully into space. "No . . . I fancy that the profit would hardly repay the effort."

"How's that?" inquired Boek, blinking.

Magnus Ridolph roused himself from his reverie, dispassionately considered Boek, who was chewing his fingernails.

"Your dilemma aroused a train of thought."

"Well?"

"In order to make money," said Magnus Ridolph, "you must provide something that someone is willing to pay for. A self-evident statement? Not so. A surprising number of people are occupied selling objects and services no one wants. Very few are successful."

"Yes," said Boek patiently. "What's that got to do with collecting garbage? Do you want the job? If you do, say so, and I'll recommend you to the Mayor."

Magnus Ridolph turned him a glance of mild reproach. "It occurred to me that 1012 Aurigae teems with Golespods any one of whom would pay for the privilege of filling the job." He sighed, shook his head. "The profit of a single transaction would hardly justify the effort . . . A Commonwealth-wide employment service? It might be a venture of considerable profit."

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FOLLOW MAGNUS RIDOLPH TO OTHER WORLDS AS HE TACKLES THE STRANGE CASE OF—

THE SUB-STANDARD SARDINES

By JACK VANCE

NEXT ISSUE!

(Continued from page 8)

3,000 miles per hour. When means of controlling such craft so that landing is practicable are attained—and they do not look to be long in coming—undoubtedly men will take off in them and come down in one piece.

The Next Barrier

So what is the next barrier to be set up by our fearful prophets? Well, the speed of light is still a long, long way off—unless some sort of hyper-space drive, as so often employed by science fiction authors, is discovered. Perhaps our prophets, playing safe, will select that for the next impassibility.

But at the speed with which science is currently progressing, there is the ever present possibility that some fantastic new discovery will leap the intervening millions of miles per hour and come up with an answer.

When, as and if this should happen it will be of immense interest to discover how such theories as the Fitzgerald Contraction and the like hold up. Somehow, when mankind does pass this barrier, we doubt if his mass, weight, size or whatnot changes appreciably —granted that he has developed some sort of insulation to protect him from the appalling pressure involved.

After all, no one knows just how fast this universe of ours is moving in toto—but the chances are that it is hopping along at an appalling speed. Yet, within its balanced forces and protected by our gravity and atmosphere, we all manage to survive granted luck against accident or the designs of our fellows.

So it is our guess that there is no determinable limit to the speed at which man can travel—if his ingenuity is given sufficient opportunity to develop. He is a persistent and ubiquitous cuss.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE forthcoming issue of STARTLING STORIES carries signal significance not only for the few of us who occupy the magazine's editorial posts but for the readers who have followed it faithfully from the appearance of the first issue on the newsstands exactly ten years ago.

Nineteen thirty-nine was quite a time to be born—parlous is hardly the word for it. But, despite the fact that the most terrible war known to history and its consequent disruptions from which we have yet fully to emerge occurred in those same ten fateful years, SS has progressed steadily until at present it is stronger than ever before.

Science fiction fans cling tenaciously, come hell and high water, to any magazine which tries to give them the best available fiction in their field. We have tried—and if current circulation figures and fan mail are any indications we have at least in part succeeded.

For which, to all of you, we give grateful thanks. And we have every intention of continuing to try to increase your support, even though that sounds incredible. You've been swell and it's been nice knowing you and we don't intend to quit now.

Ten years ago next issue, STARTLING STORIES was born. Volume 1, Number 1 was headed by a great feature novel, the late Stanley G. Weinbaum's THE BLACK FLAME, a story which made the fabulous Margaret of Urbs virtually a household name among its more ardent readers.

THE ETERNAL MAN by D. D. Sharp was the first HALL OF FAME story and the only other short story in the issue was SCIENCE ISLAND by Eando Binder. Features—and they were legion—included a Tribute to Stanley G. Weinbaum by Otto Binder, the first Fanzine Review, a Guest Editorial by the late Otis Adelbert Kline, Thrills in Science by Mort Weisinger, a Science Question Box, a "Scientific" Crossword Puzzle and The Ether Vibrates.

A good issue, even from the lapse of ten years, but a little lopsided on features. The Ether Vibrates consisted of less than two pages of letters, most of them from stf authors, and contained no comment from the Editor. A blessing, perhaps.

Now, come January, 1949, and what? The first lead science fiction novel of this magazine's second decade of existence is one of the most brilliantly conceived and written long stories we have ever had the privilege to run —THE TIME AXIS by Henry Kuttner.

In a way it is the story of Jeremy "Jerry" Cortland, roving newspaper correspondent, who skips to Brazil with a flock of feature assignments to dodge alimony payments and there, in a cobbled alley in Rio de Janeiro, becomes a carrier of the appalling plague of nekron or dead matter which is spreading from the ultimate future through all of time.

Back in America Jerry is summoned by great scientist Ira de Kalb and his equally

famed female colleague, Dr. Essen, who have, through their own investigations, become aware of the plague and its origin as well as of Jerry's strange contact with the nekron which is spreading through the world.

Along with an Army colonel, also chosen, the four of them enter a cavern in the Lurentians which is located along the axis of time from the ultimate past to the ultimate future, whence a dying universe is spreading its plague of death. It is the face of Ea, spiritual goal of the final nekropolis, or dead city, of Earth, which they must reach.

THE TIME AXIS is magnificently written, so taut with constant peril and so vivid in its imaginative concepts that it will leave most of you wrung at its conclusion. We feel that it is the finest science fiction story ever to emerge from the vastly talented Kuttner typewriter. It is a fitting inaugural for what we hope will be a great second ten years of life.

The HALL OF FAME story, this time a long novelet, is MARTIAN GESTURE by Alexander M. Phillips, first printed in WONDER STORIES in October, 1935. It is a great realistic effort, a reverse of the usual tale of space travel, which has immense timeliness in a forbidding present.

Its theme is simple—that of the first expedition from Mars to an Earth which has all but destroyed itself through wars and the tale of the lone human survivor the Martians manage to take back with them. But in wealth and selection of detail it attains great conviction and is as much a tale of tomorrow as it was when it was written. A top flight HoF entry to match the Kuttner novel.

The fourth of Jack Vance's ingenious Magnus Ridolph stories, THE SUB-STANDARD SARDINES, will be present, plus other short stories selected from a glittering list which includes such names as Ray Bradbury, Fredric Brown, William F. Temple and John D. MacDonald. The Ether will Vibrate and other features will include the new Book Review and the Review of the Science Fiction Fan Publications.

We don't think we're going backwards, really we don't.

ETHERGRAMS

THE darnedest things happen around this office, as the following somewhat bewildered card from usually waspish and occasionally witty Joe Schaumburger reveals. This is an utterly new one on us. But, coupled with a similar experience to one Dave Thomas, whose epistle received a burst of glory in the Henry M. Spelman fanzine, SPARX, as "The Letter STARTLING Was Afraid to Print," we think it rates a re-run here. Incidentally, Spelman, who's afraid? It sounds like arrant sensationalism to we. Herewith, the Schaumberger missive—

WHAT'S A DERO PLOT?
by Joe Schaumburger

Dear Editor: I was surprised as all unprintable to get my letter back with a rejection slip. Is this something new, or what? Maybe the letter got sent to the wrong editor by mistake and he thought it was a story. Maybe the whole thing is a dero plot. Maybe Fort was right.

Anyway, thanks for the rejection slip. I shall frame it and hang it on the wall and treasure it to my dying day. Puzzledly yours.—*1822 Bathgate Avenue, Bronx 57, New York.*

You're surprised! How about us, Joe? It's something new, all right. But the answer is simply that the department which weeds out those manuscripts which don't look legible, literate or whatnot to save us editors from a fate worse than death, somehow got your and Thomas' letters by mistake. The rest is obvious.

Seriously, Joe, you may be illegible, illiterate *and* whatnot, but at least you didn't have someone run your lost epistle as "The Letter STARTLING Was Afraid To Print." For which—many, many thanks. We ain't scared of almost nobody.

SPIKED PADDLE
by S. "Hungry Red" Mason

Dear Editor: Your editorial in the July ish made several points that ought to have been developed further—but I suppose even the nervous system of an editor has its limitations when confronted with the possibility of a mailbag full of feudin' mail. Someday we'll find an stfmag editor taking "organized fandom" firmly over his knee and administering the spiked paddle. Till that happy day I suppose a few little flicks on the wrist embedded in a treacle coating will have to serve.

Now let's get down to stfstuf. The cover—Bergey does have his ups and downs. This one's a down. Far down. The dame, like several other cover gals of yours, appears to be uttering a maniacal giggle. Also, she hasn't got a lot of sex appeal, inspite of the cut-down nightie. The color and feel of the whole thing is just plain gaudy. A hearty tsk-tsk.

But the interior art is consistently good. How is it your dames are so luscious on the inside pages and such hags on the front? (I foresee an attack on me for this. Ahaha, he's interested in nothing but dames. To which I reply, cuttingly, "Sho' nuff!")

Valley of Creation; well, I just don't like Hamilton. He grates on my technical side by the offhand way he tosses his science around, and I get a little bored with clashing swords and flaming guns after several dozen pages of same.

But everything else in the July ish was fine, with one lamentable exception—"When the Earth lived."

Compared with Kuttner's more recent work this thing becomes a real stinker, whereas if it had been published as the work of a new writer one wouldn't feel the corniness of it so much. But it is distinctly old hat. Why republish a yarn on the basis of its having been a good story once? Must needs be a good 'un today, too.

Every other yarn was up to Standards—which are good to wonderful. Especially St. Clair's "Quis Custodiet". It's got a quality of thinking in it that's rare in stf. I know your average reader loves his space battles and so do I—but keep on giving us think-pieces too.

Letters; Somebody tried to answer La Astra's query about "Soma" by mentioning "Brave New World." Soma, in the original version is just plain old ambrosia, Oriental style. The Hindu gods lived on Sanskrit Blue-Plate Specials that included this Soma stuff. No, the authors of the Bhramaghad-Gita never included the recipe. They weren't writing a celestial Bartender's Guide.

The Zimmer writes a wonderful letter every ish. I'm beginning to wonder if she's on the staff. In fact, I was about to take off for the East Beanbush with a boo-kay for Miss Z., wearing my highest type Banker Special leer, when she had to go and announce that she looked like the Bergey girl. Farewell, Astra, our romance has croaked a-borin'. I couldn't take a girl dressed in rags and with her mouth hanging down on her collarbone into the Stork Club, or even to the Flatbush Chowder and Stf Athletic Soc'y.

Wally Weber, the Poor Man's Pegler. Why print letters like this? It's probably pretty hard on the poor kid to have a pointed head without your exhibiting his follies in the Reader's Squeak. He doesn't like any of the mag, he sez. Tough tiddy, chum. Why buy it? And he doesn't like the yarns. He can tell Kuttner how to write, doubtless. In fact, he can write so much better than any SS author that his vituperations are doubtless the effect of too much caviar and champagne, bought with his earnings in litrachoor.

And last—Joe Rhodes. No women stf authors? Brackett, C. L. Moore, and others, including St. Clair. And tho fewer than the males, their quality's much, MUCH better.—c/o S. I. U. Hall, 51 Beaver Street, New York City.

Nice and viperish, Sam, nice and viperish—what do they feed you down at the Seaman's International—St. Clair's brollo au gratin? Sorry you don't like Hamilton, who is one of the ablest true professionals in the business. And to gahenna with your "technical side"—just which side is it, may we ask?

Also, too bad about the Bergey girl business. However, you have our Astra mixed up with the wrong cover girl—the one she claimed was a cousin was the handclapping Virginia on the cover of the March SS—which is, you should agree, a very different proposish, and dish. She is not a member of the staff, worse luck.

Thanks for the plug for authoresses—and never call one that if you expect to escape unflayed. Write us again—from the Stork Club.

VENGEANCE HITS THE STANDS
by Rodney Palmer

Dear Editor: This issue of Startling hits the stands with a vengeance, especially where, in the editorial fronting the book, the great man deals with a topic of highest interest to the sf fan, ie, the intellectuallism of fandom in general.

That fandom is intellectual in a great degree should be by now pretty evident and even obvious to all. But why the clannishness, and the consistant aura of roguish amiability throughout? Man, this just don't happen with, for instance, Westernaddicts, or Detective addicts (Baker Street Irregulars excepted). From where does this sort of mutual understanding, kinship and vibratory sympathy arise? And whither is this snowball heading?

Constant growth and constant liberal expansion is noted with awe here. Listen. It is going somewhere and it's going fast. And the more advanced and more imaginative and more socially concious and social-minded men of the world are coming into a tightly packed group dominated by one overpowering, overwhelming mutual interest.

Here are guys meeting in the back of Startling and Wonder who never dreamt of each other's existence before, who are meeting and swapping high cultural ideals. . . . And these clubs and these organizations. . . . So far it's all in fun. But this kind of friendly intellectuallism is dynamite and anything can happen. Righto?

Now let's both relax and forget that heavyweight stuff for a minute. I'll light a cigar while you brace yourself for the onslaught against the beloved mag.

1. REALITIES UNLIMITED. Right in the top spot, and MacDowell is the top-notcher who can do it, too. I would have liked more bang-bang, here. How about a little bang-bang sprinkled all through the book, eh?
2. WHEN THE EARTH LIVED. Hank crowded the above for first, even. But not quite. Fantastically and impossibly absorbing.
3. VALLEY OF CREATION. Aprox. two and one half chapters finished here and the rather retarding opening, the vagueness of purpose, the sketchy characterization root this to third. But Hamilton rates this spot on the credit of past performance. I know Ed never fails and I'll read and enjoy VALLEY OF CREATION.
4. WHEN SHADOWS FALL
5. PERFECT SERVANT.
6. QUIS CUSTODIET.
7. HARD LUCK DIGGINGS.

All of the last four named above were sluggish, meagre and all but incomprehensible. These writers (all but Mrs. St. Clair) can do much, much better. Get after the lot of 'em. Anything else? Well. . . . Letter column this month wasn't too interesting. Rick always clicks and leaves me stunned and confused, just like everybody else, but it's a cruel trick you play on the guy with that editing business. (Not as cruel as the task of correcting them—Ed.)

NOMINATION FOR HALL OF FAME. *White Barrier* by Frank Belknap Long. Dunno what issue, but way back.—226 West 60th Street, Chicago 2, Illinois.

Well, Little Man, What Now? Or, perhaps, Whither are we Drifting? Kidding aside, Rodney, you've got a point. But is it dynamite? We'll settle for good talk and ever-widening contacts and understanding, with everything else as gravy.

MIRACLE ISSUE
by Marion Eleanor "Astra" Add-a-Pearl Zimmer

Dear Editor: This is really too good to be true. For the sake of this miracle, I could even endure that cover, which not only is an atavistic return to your old lurid smears and blotches, but didn't even remotely resemble a human—or was it supposed to?

The miracle to which I refer is the conjunction of Kuttner, Hamilton, Vance and McDowell, not to mention St Clair, etc., thrown in as ballast.

Whenever I read a Hamilton story I have the feeling that whatever I may say between times, Hamilton is almost my favorite author. I've giggled over captain Future, cried over the *Star of Life* and *Transuranic* and *Come Home to Earth*—and now the old world-wrecker comes up with a story in which not only is there no world wrecker—there's not even a planet wrecked, just a little forest.

VALLEY OF CREATION—the title hurt. I refused to read it for almost a week. Finally—at the nethermost edge of boredom and a surfeit of *Anna Karenina*—I made up my mind to struggle through it—and what a surprise! Here, beyond a doubt, is the best story Hamilton has produced to date.

In sheer style—Hamilton must give way to Kuttner. In horrors, he gives way to Bradbury. But for sheer yarn-spinning and the power to hold his audience—

well, give me Hamilton, every time. You could have told me Kuttner wrote it and I wouldn't have given you an argument—that's how much I liked it.

Just one minor oddity. Remember Shorr Kon in the STAR OF LIFE? Any relation to Shar Kan in this? Or Shere Kahn in the Mowgli books?

But what's the use? I shall bind this tale with VALLEY OF THE FLAME when I get to making bound volumes of my prozines. They are similar and I could hardly tell which I liked the best. (better?—Ed.) I have a notion it's this one. The description of Nelson's feelings as a wolf were indescribable! It makes me long to race the forest at dawn—(You can have that one too, Marion—Ed.)

I hate to put Kuttner in second place, yet this month he must take a back seat. Not very far back, though. WHEN THE EARTH LIVED is one of the more excellen HoF stories I have read. I fail to see any reason for the love stories, though.

REALITIES UNLIMITED and WHEN SHADOWS FALL were both pleasant reading. PERFECT SERVANT had at least the blessing of an original ending. A tale seldom ends with nothing!

I am very glad to see St Clair getting away from Oona and Jick. QUIS CUSTODIET was excellent. I have enjoyed most of Miss (or is it Mrs.?) St Clair's tales, but this is her best story so far. I really like to see new talent develop. I have read every story she has written for you and your competitors.

I am very glad to see Jack Vance again. If my memory serves me correctly, he hasn't appeared in your pages since my first issue of SS, almost two years ago now. But I still remember his PLANET OF THE BLACK DUST, the first "Space-opera" I ever read. I haven't read his newest effort as yet, but I know beforehand that it will be well worth reading.

The illustrations for the novel were beautiful—Finlay's finest. I'm sorry I can't say the same of Finlay for "When the Earth Lived." I dislike pornography in all forms and the fact that it is art doesn't diminish the fact that this picture is objectionable. Napoli is his blotchy, scratchy self, but all in all, preferable to Marchioni as a house artist.

What happened to the Mad Mark, anyway? I rather liked his long-legged, ascetic-faced femmes, and his style and design were capable, if not beautiful. In fact, when one comes right down to it, I prefer him to most of your artists. While he was still drawing for you, I used to gripe a bit; but now that he's gone where all good hack-artists go, I'm discovering a tardy affection for his work. Where is he, anyway? Not dead, I hope. Perhaps he turned into a sentient speedball!

As for Ronald Wagner—no comment. He thinks he can write, I guess. Maybe he can. I hope so. Gwen Cunningham; I've been wondering where you were. I missed your letters. Now if Norma Tufts will come back, and Chad Oliver, we'll have all the old line-up. I rather like the new, though—Marion Zimmer (hey, that's me); that poem wasn't an ode, it was a *terza rima*. Billie Lee Randolph; I agree that plain "Lee" is better. Rex Ward; I'll send you a bottle of correction fluid next Christmas. Or maybe Ye Ed should appoint you proofreader? James Hamilton; ah, a supporter! Jimmy, I love Kuttner, too! As for Tombrock, it's just because of disordered world affairs that his plan for an international stfclub would be be so good.

A parting word of warning. I am going to send some of my original tales to your editorial desk for appraisal one of these fine days. Brackett, C. L. Moore, etc., have proven that femmes CAN make the grade in STF, therefore—nothing venture, nothing have. Be warned!—R. F. D. #1, East Greenbush N. Y.

Okay, Astra, with your letter we'll start at the bottom and work up. As we have already said, you can't intimidate *us*. So let's see some stfiction from your typewriter (if you can haul up those low-water g's.) There is only one way to learn how to write professionally and you won't learn it in schools—even normal schools. So get busy and stay with it.

As for your *terza rima*—it was always our humble belief that such a rhyme was supposed to run aba, bcb, cdc, ded et cetera, usually in iambic pentameter. In your Ode to Startling, you stuck pretty close to the above beat, all right, but the rhyming didn't quite come off.

Your line-ending words were *tell, woes, threat, toes, excel, debt*—or abc, bac—in the first stanza. In the second they were *fame, war, -less, name, more, less*—or def, def. And so on, in varying degrees of confusion. But at any rate, neither poem nor letter reached that ghastly ded.

Marchioni was dipped in a vat of boiling soma by a group of outraged fans, Jack Vance made earlier appearances in TWS and SS during the war years. We're glad he's back too. Margaret St. Clair is *Mrs.* Ray St. Clair. Her husband is also an author. You'll have to write Hamilton personally anent the blood lines of Shorr Kon, Shar Kan *et cie.*

In view of your reaction to the girl on the July cover you should be grateful for our ibid remarks to S. Mason. Maybe you two should get together at that. When are you sending us a picture?

TOILIN' AND SLAVIN'
by Rickey Slavin

Dear Editor: About the July SS—the cover was remarkably sober (whaaat? Ed.). The background was a unitone silver-grey and the only color was the girl's red dress and bright skin. Shame, shame—no purple sky, orange earth, magenta dress, green BEM etc! However, despite the fact that, if her dress were so torn, her nail polish would also have worn off (We don't get this one—Ed.), I liked it.

Hamilton's VALLEY OF CREATION is remarkably good. Remarkable not that Hamilton wrote it but that the plot, old as it is, is still good. Here's the way it goes—soldiers of fortune are enlisted in remote (insert Africa, China, India, Russia or what-have-you) to come to aid of (insert prince, haggard leader, lovely girl). When they reach (insert desert, hidden lake, valley, wondrous city) they find that (insert animals, birds, men from Mars, Saturn, Venus etc., fish) have allied themselves with the enemies of their host. They find (a lovely girl, an ugly girl (huh? Ed.), a harem) with whom one of the adventurers immediately falls in love. You take it from there (Who—*we*? Ed.). But despite the gripes I really like Hamilton.

REALITIES UNLIMITED was good though shallow. It stopped short of real satisfaction. WHEN SHADOWS FALL was very nice. Kuttner is as usual—Hank, the Master. HARD LUCK DIGGINS was okay. QUIS CUSTODIET—I'm glad that Maggie St. Clair got out of the Oona-Jick rut. Good! PERFECT SERVANT—cute. Who is this Sheldon? A newcomer, one of the old boys or what?

THE ETHER WOBBLES—that list of fan clubs is incomplete. What abou tthe ESFA? Or the Queens Science Fiction League, now active again. Or the Brooklyn SF Circle? What's the matter?—*1626 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.*

For your information the fan club listing included only those organizations which showed sufficient interest to write in. We didn't go looking for them. Next listing will be in the December TWS—get your announcements in by last month at the latest.

Walt Sheldon is a newcomer to stf—but no neophyte as a writer. His sports and aviation

stories (Sheldon was a captain in the AAF) have long been more or less regular features of our companion magazines in those fields. Let's hope he gives us more like PERFECT SERVANT. As to your comment on the Hamilton opus—well, think you're pretty smart, don't you?

ANCIENT OF DAZE
by William Thiessen

Dear Editor: Caverns! The Ancient Race! I stopped reading one magazine because I was sick of those words. Now I hope you won't start using them. But aside from that I did enjoy "The Valley of Creation." Kuttner fans probably liked "When the Earth Lived" but if you must print Hall of Fame Stories, please don't print ones like that. Kuttner has evidently developed far beyond the stage of that story.

Speaking of the Hall of Fame, here is a suggestion. Drop it. SF has changed so much since the early 1930's that few stories then regarded as good would now even receive a rating of fair. Now I don't want to knock SS or TWS, but it is true that these two magazines are now printing stories 100% better than they were even three years ago. SS and TWS did have some good old-timers (Especially Weinbaum) but some of your competitors also had some good stories.

I am now getting to the point of the above mentioned suggestion. A few years back, an anthology of SF came out. I am speaking of "The Best in Science Fiction". Now, I have noticed in many of your issues an advertisement for pocket-sized books called Popular Library Specials. The address of their publishers is the same as yours, so I assume that they are published by the same company. So, why not bring out "The Best in Science Fiction" in a pocketbook. Or, if that is impossible, print an anthology of your own best—the really best. Another pocketbook firm published an SF anthology about five years ago and it is still in print, so there must have been a pretty good sale.

In closing, I wonder if you can tell me what the sine of pi is. In Perfect Servant the quantity is mentioned but I never before heard of pi having a sine.—*48 Remsen St., Cohoes, N. Y.*

Sine of pi, our foot! We're still looking for a cosiner on our last bank loan. Let's see what the readers say anent the anthology. You might have something there, Cohoes. And you certainly cannot hurt our sensitivities by stating that we have improved a hundred per cent in three years—even if it *is* so.

SNEARY, BEERY BEM
by Rick Sneary

Dear Editor: Say what happen in your subscription dept. I nearly neaver got my copy of SS this month. Nearly got me in trouble too. Or at least as a result of it I spent a frustrated day. Frances Kaysor who's letter you printed, called me up, thinking I had seen her letter. But when she realized I hadn't, she signed off with out telling me who she was. I spent the rest of the day in a state of wild frustration, trying to think of a gal I know with such a sweet and charming voice. As I couldn't, I nearly went mad. Luckily, for me, SS showed up, and puting two and three together, and figgered it out.

Say I didn't write last month, so didn't get a chance to mention the swell story by Bradbury. I think it was the best you have used by him. And atleast the 3rd best of his work I have read,. (I am speeking of "And the Moon still be Bright.") Ofcourse he will neaver quite match "Homecoming", or the moody "Million Year Picnic." I think this lates story tho made me realize more fully his greatness. Kuttner writes stories, Bradbury creates them.

Oh well, back to the present, or the July SS at least. It would seem brother Hamilton has climbed on the "copy Merritt" bandwagon that Hank has been riding so long.

Frankly he does a little better than the last two by HK. And a lot more solled than Bok's beautfiul, but jumbled story.. But don't you think it is time you found some other subject. And why must it always be a life-or-death strugle. Can't anyone have an exciting advinture for 60 pages woth out risking there life. . . .

No, I guess you are right. It would be dull. Look at the "Somo-racket". .. And your readers can't stand scientic-probable stories. Or atleast the guy that signed your checks thinks so. You know if I could write, I might try a story for you. But.. No don't worry, I'm not. I wouldn't care to read it anyway.

Say, incase you remember anything my friend Joe Schaumburger told you about me. I deny it. As the old saying goes, I will protect myself from mine enemies, but God protect me from mine friends." At any rate I do not make up West cost fandom, or even lead a small part of it, as Joe seems to think he made you think, or though he thung.

Say, why didn't you turn all your covers over. The gal on the inside was sexer, and looked happy beside. But then if you did Bergey would be out of work, and in might to inside illos. Realy tho old fish-cake, your covers have improved quite a bit in the four years I have been reading the revolting thing.

No BEM's in ages, and the hero seems to be going. Now if he could get rid of—the title, (ha fooled ya.) it would look just peachey. Oh yes. Tell Earle to use the modal he had for One of Three. She was cuter than this lates bleched blond.

I got quite a kick out of your editorial about fandom. Not bad at all for a guy that was brought into this world at the wrong end. Your calling us anarchist adds a new name to a growing list. I nearly died mend Howard Miller, Co-Editor of Dream Quest said that he thought fandom was missbegotten radio hammery. (I not only miss spell the words that exsist, but the ones that don't.)

Two notes on the club listing. First I would suggest that in the future internation groups that draw their members from all over such as the NFFF and Young Fandom, be listed by themself. And a note made that they can be joined by anyone.

Second, I wish you would mention that the address given for officers in Young Fandom are now incorrect. Ellections you know. Also Grant, the s-t, has left on a tour of the world. And I am now acting sec.-tres. And will gladly answer all questions of anyone wishing to join the club.

Oh another beff. Your zine review don't exactly match what fans think. Not atleast in the case of FANEWS and Tympani. Don Willson and I were talking the matter over last week, and agreed you are giving Tym. the short tend of the stick. Fanews has dribled out a few pages, of news six months late, in the last year. While up tell the last three months Tym had been on time, with late news.

I know Dunk has had a lot of trouble, so I don't blame him. But just becouse he prints some of his stuff, doesn't mean he is better than any one elce. I don't hold with the group that are allways panning Dunk, or calling him 'The lardbucket that walks like a man. Dunk and I were good friends. But I wouldn't tell Graham to sub to it. And I'd tell Graham anything. Mostly unprintable.

Say why the hot remarks in re. my calling your glowing mag a plup? What else would you call it, with fuzzy paper, untremed edges, gody covers, weird type face, etc.. I don't mind understand. I'd read stf if it was printed in green ink, and you bought it in rolls. But still a spade isn't a shovel. I can well imagin you would just as soon forget you edit a pulp, tho I can't think why.

Guess that does it. I'd advise you not to try and cut this. . . Yep. If I was you I'd use it just as it is. To light a fire that is. Maybe next time I'll write a good letter.—*2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, California.*

You done okay this time, Rick. Sorry to have disappointed you on the fanzine listings —will check *tout suite* to see if you are right (He probably is—Ed.). And by this time we hope that you and Frances Keysor are like—well, like this. (business of holding two fingers close together).

HARD TO GET
by Trevor Wilson

Dear Editor: I have been a science fiction fan for a number of years now but the only mags I can get interested in are American. I keep going the rounds of the local book stalls but only rarely am I lucky—occasionally I manage to get an old American stf magazine. Yesterday, however, I had a stroke of luck. I got STARTLING STORIES for May, 1948. Getting this mag gave me the opportunity to write to you at your correct address.

I would like to express my views on it.

First, the cover is poor I think. Jay never wore armor in the novel and if he did we assume the easiest armor to get would be gold, not blue. The only other complaint I want to make is about THE HOUSE OF RISING WINDS. It is altogether improbable and silly. Long can do better than that. The rest of the stories are very good indeed to my way of thinking.

I want to congratulate you on your ETHERGRAM feature (Hey! That's us!—Ed.). It is one of the *best* letter features I have ever read and the highlight of the magazine.—*6 Brook Square Street, Morley Nr Leeds, Yorkshire, England.*

Darned if I know why the armor would be gold instead of steel—but your final compliment more than makes up for any such quibbling. I hope you luck in finding American magazines improved. Write us how things go.

LOVE THAT MAG!
by Evie Culley

Dear Editor: Just finished reading SS. Mmmmmmm! Love that *mag!* The cover wasn't any too good (Pardon me, Bergey, but you can do much better). The rest of the illustrations were fine though.

First, of course, comes THE VALLEY OF CREATION. Wonderful! It almost left me speechless. WHEN THE EARTH LIVED comes next (natch). It deserves to be reprinted *again*. PERFECT SERVANT was interesting, HARD LUCK DIGGINGS good and REALITIES UNLIMITED positively eerie. WHEN SHADOWS FALL made me weep. To think that such a thing could happen (did we say "could" happen?) to dear old Home Sweet Home. QUIS CUSTODIET got me kind of confused and I think I still am. I never fathom what the secret was that spy was after.—*Rural Route #2, Sandpoint, Idaho.*

We didn't find QUIS CUSTODIET confusing. It was a brilliant exposition of the lack of understanding between species. And Kynnastor was not in search of a secret. He merely was an agent of the "blown-ups" operating in the human camp, probably for general information, perhaps sabotage and assassination. We're glad, however, that you liked the rest of the issue.

GRATIFYING RESPONSE
by Bob Shea

Dear Ed: Just finished another excellent issue (July) of Startling. Thanks for mentioning my National Planeteers in your fan club list. You will be pleased to learn that in the few days between publication and the writing of this letter there has all ready been a gratifying response.

To any others who may be interested—the club's purpose is to promote science fiction, bring fans closer together, and encourage beginning science fiction writers (In conjunction with this, we'll be sending a fanzine your way any day now). Those who wish to join just write me; there is no entrance fee.

Henry Kuttner's HoF opus in the present issue and the other crudities that have been reprinted in previous issues are good arguments for discontinuing the Hall of Fame. Don't waste space with this stuff—give us modern science fiction!

Modern Science fiction—St. Clair's QUIS CUSTODIET? in the present issue is a perfect example. Her smooth style and excellent handling of suspense always chains me to her stories. How can one say they don't like St. Clair? Well, it takes all kinds.

By the way, there has been a lot of talk about what the coming of space travel will do to science fiction. My guess is that a whole segment of stories—the interplanetary ones—will disappear from the pages of science fiction mags and turn up as "current" fiction.

Then, of course, when the other planets are civilized, interplanetary fiction will be relegated to the position held by mid-west and pioneer stories.

But there will always be the branch of stf that is just a step ahead of fact. Who knows what the Ray Bradburys and Hank Kuttners and George O. Smiths of the 22nd Century will write about? That in itself would make good material for a story.

Say, if you want to improve the letter column, how about offering awards for the best letter? Let the fans be the judges. As to what you could offer—a Lawrence or Finlay original would look nice on somebody's wall . . .

Oh yes—in closing I would like to call a little detail to your attention. The headings of both my letters printed in your mags so far are in dialect—the first in hillbilly; the second, cockney. Sure, faith and begorrah, why would ye be after doin' that?—*150 Bennett Avenue, New York 33, New York.*

Well this one wasn't. Your idea of a reader-judged letter contest per issue has points of interest—but it presents many problems as well. For instance, how long after the appearance of the magazine would the readers have to inform Ye Ed. of their opinions? And how long after that would we be able to get the poll results into print? Since we work five months ahead it would represent quite a gap . . . too much of a gap, we fear.

As for the fate of science fiction in the future—well, it seems to us that Fredric Brown gave a pretty good picture of what may well happen in his WHAT MAD UNIVERSE, SS September, 1948. Much of what we today call stf simply became adventure fiction with the coming of space travel.

NO MORE HORSEBACK
by Gene A. Hyde

Dear Editor: Well, here it is May, the July issue is here, and it's time to write a letter for the September (pardon, November—Ed.) issue. My, but the time seems to fly, especially with finals coming up in three weeks.

Incidentally, I'm writing this in chem lab so any spots on the paper will either be chemicals or me.

The lead novel was excellent this time. A little off the beaten track. So help me, I'll never be able to ride a horse again. It also contained a good moral lesson for any and all who caught it.

St. Clair's epic was also excellent, and again we have a moral. If this keeps up, you'll have to change the name to Poor Richard's Almanac. I hope this proves to all the doubters that St. Clair can write better things than the Oona and Jick stories . . . can and has.

The HoF was very good this time. It seems to be following an upward trend, hope it doesn't fall off.

Gwen Cunningham: Yes, people are awful, the only thing wrong with civilization is people.

Ed and Les Cole: Speaking of mathematician stoppers, how about the exact numerical area of a circle with one unit its radius?

Pfc. Don McGreevey; Tried your recipe for an atomic bomb, will let you know how I came out next time I circle the moon.

Well, if I don't stop this thing and start watching my experiment, we'll have that new science building sooner than we expected.—*400 East 8th. St., Beardstown, Ill.*

Nice letter, Gene, but what in hades is a "moral lesson?" It's a new one *sur nous.* And there were no spots on your epistle.

NO BEMS!
by Barbara Ann Lahn

Dear Editor: Alas and alack: I am one of those few poor souls who does not own a typewriter, so this letter will doubtless not see print. However—the July issue of SS being the first I have read of your magazines, I feel compelled to make comment on same.

First, the cover—very good and NO BEMS!!! This artist Bergey is swell.

You claim your SS is, and I quote, "fiction first, science second" and that rates a long loud cheer. Of course science is a vital part of every story but it sometimes snarls up the fiction and plot. Either it is overplayed (which causes the plot to be buried under a mound of facts) or it is used as a crutch for a dull story.

VALLEY OF CREATION seems to have escaped this pitfall which claims many good stories. The basic idea of man and animals living as equals seemed new and very beautiful to me. However, since I have been reading sciencefiction for only a year I will not try to say, "That story is swell or this one is bad." Such reactions depend, after all, partly on the writer's ability and partly on his reader's personal opinions.

REALITIES UNLIMITED—They sure were and what a mess the author made of them! I wish this story had gone deeper than it did. It reminds me of a moron who scratched the skin of an orange and what he saw he believed to be the center of the orange.

WHEN SHADOWS FALL—Whoopee! Earth gets a sniff of kickapoo joy juice and perks up again because of quiet, goody-guy Lars. "And Earth lives happily ever after" should have been the last sentence of this fairy tale.

WHEN THE EARTH LIVED—A story written for the science lovers. You know, those jerks who raise a big fuss when they come to the conclusion (aided by fingers and toes) that the author of a story was WRONG! Say that Spighel had 299,999 hairs on his noggin instead of 300,000. "So there!" they cry. "You made a mistake—*you made a mistake*—YOU MADE A MISTAKE!

A friend (Not any longer) said recently, "Why do you read that junk?" meaning STARTLING STORIES. "Looka here!" I cried hotly, "This book is filled with a mode of thinking not used by any of the others (see our companion magazine THRILLING WONDER STORIES, for similar thinking—Ed.), poor souls. They don't realize the glory of stories like this.

Vive la scientifiction!!!

HARD LUCK DIGGINGS—This story would have fared better in a less animated issue. It's getting so that no stfan trusts anybody or anything. Besides, all of the wonders up till this story—and now trees that strangle you and give you rubies, no less. At last the trees talk back against Mankind stripping them of life and beauty.

QUIS CUSTODIET—The moral that we are not fully thankful for a bit of green here and there and now and then was very true. The rest of the story was good but rather tame to serve your loyal readers. I liked it however and some tameness is good for all readers.

PERFECT SERVANT—An amusing tale with a novel twist at the end for a parting shot. Good for a hearty laugh. We need more stories of this type.

Out of pity for Ye Ed. I shall not enclose any poems, ditties, odes et cetera. Instead, an idea. Why not an "Oscar" for the writer of the year's best story? Fans who are interested, please say, "How is it done?" That way I'll be able to get your opinions of the idea.

THE ETHER VIBRATES with a whole gang of swell people—but some . . . welll! . . . you know, Editor! Haw, haw, haw! They starts with "Dear Editor" and then rip your entrails out. Oh well, it's all in the game.

I realize that I have much to learn about the basic ideas of scientifiction and am only too willing to start. I would like to join a club and would love to write to anyone (human, that is).—*Lahnwood Kennels, Bristol Pike, RD #1, Croydon, Pennsylvania.*

Such langwitch from a tender miss. You may have an idea with your Oscar scheme but it will need a lot more working out. Go to it, fans. Write us again, Barbara, and good luck with your fanbitions.

GAP IN HIS LIFE
by William O. Dawson

Dear Ed: I've been a SF fan for about 12 years now. But during the war I missed the U.S.A. SF mags and that is a big gap in my life. I wonder if any of your readers would be interested in exchanging back numbers of SS and TWS for British SF mags (SS and TWS from 1940 on, that is).—*c/o Baird, 45 Rosevale Street, Glasgow W. I., Scotland.*

Well, fellows and gals, how about it?

BEYOND CONTROL
by Don Cox

Dear Editor: Due to circumstances beyond my control, I have just finished reading the latest issue of *Startling Stories.* I will dispose of all fiddle-faddle and start the comments immediately.

THE VALLEY OF CREATION. Edmond Hamilton, as usual, is up to par. Of course guy gets gal, but that is to be expected. Why should Hamilton ruin things?

REALITIES UNLIMITED. This was a fine novelet by McDowell. It looks as though there were going to be some more bones on the desert. But love saved them. Abby's voice snaps Clint out of it, mind beats mind and they live happily ever after.

WHEN SHADOWS FALL. The best I can rate this story is fair. It was almost boring at times and held little interest. It had a completely unexpected ending which stopped me from thinking that this issue wasn't going to be so hot.

WHEN THE EARTH LIVED. When Kuttner wrote this he was lacking in nothing. A fine story by a master. Nothing more can be said.

HARD LUCK DIGGINGS. Another good story with a variation. Vance struck my store of appreciation when he wrote this story.

QUIS CUSTODIET. I expected something better than this from Margaret St. Clair.

PERFECT SERVANT. This was excellently done. It appealed to me immensely. Why wasn't this written sooner?

ILLUSTRATIONS.

The cover by Bergey was well done. Naturally in the foreground is la femme. Why? Why not? Who cares? Me! Skip it.

All the illustrations for THE VALLEY OF CREATION were well done. I won't say a word about the one on page 9. I don't have to. Someone else will.

The one on page 70—71 is self-explaining. The one on page 83 was done by Finlay, so it couldn't be anything but good.

The pic on page 93 speaks for itself so I'll keep quiet. There's certainly something going on in the pic on page 102. But man triumphs over plant. Page 109. Next please. Page 115. Here comes nothing! So the story went. Well, that's all for the pics. It's enough, too. Last, but not least, we come to the Ethergrams.

This is SS' high spot in each ish. In regards to Captain Kenneth F. Slater's letter, I looked up the word "soma" in the dictionary and found soma is a "climbing plant of East India which yields a milky juice, from which, formerly, an intoxicating drink was distilled." This may not be what the Captain wanted but it's interesting. I agree with Gwen Cunningham about Finlay's pics. He IS the best, no doubt about that.

I could say a lot more, but I won't. You've had enough of me. I make no threats, but editors who don't print my letters should watch out for packages in the mails containing collapsible atom-bombs.—*4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine.*

As long as the things collapse before they explode we won't mind a bit. You fans have dug up more darned stuff about soma than we (and without doubt Margaret St. Clair) ever thought of. It's becoming as much of a habit as Xeno.

FROM DON'S NAMESAKE
by Ed Cox

Dear Editor: The July issue of *Startling Stories* to hand so once more I take the pride of the Royal Typewriter Company and pound out a letter for your wastebasket (no doubt).

Just to be different, I'll start with the cover. Oh, my gosh, Editor ole man! Must this be? Every time? I suppose she is screaming in terror but she looks, by the expression on her face, like she just gave somebody a hotfoot!

Now for the stories. This magazine is, no doubt, intended to give the readers several hours of reading pleasure. Well, it did just that this time. A very enjoyable issue. Tops was the novel by the old master. I believe we can call Hamilton that. I enjoyed his story immensely. Let's see. It's his first since January 1947 I think. And just as good as ever he is too! Finlay's work for the novel was quite good. Except that fugitive pic on page 9, from a Love mag.

Outstanding in the shorts is the HoF. It got the cover didn't it? No matter how good the HoF is, I think the novel deserves the cover! But anyway, this HoF story, as many lately, really was worth reprinting. Keep the good ones coming!

Emmett McDowell's novelet was really pretty nice. His first story in SS isn't it? Very good reading.

HARD LUCK DIGGINGS was very welcome. I'm glad to see Jack Vance back! And this was an excellent return performance too. Even better, it looks like we'll be seeing more of Magnus Ridolph too! A hearty cheer for that!

L. Ron Hubbard's short story was another very good one. An understatement! The writing, as everyone very well knows, was tops and his description of the dying Earth was wonderful and, possibly, prophetic? Remember Hamilton's FORGOTTEN WORLD? I wonder if that is the way it would be if Man did ever spread his culture and empire to the stars?

Margaret St. Clair's short story this time is better than the Oona and Jick series. Although I thought this story would turn out differently, it surprised me and ended very logically. I thought they'd killed off the mutants but I see how they must have them. I wonder, too, if this situation will ever become reality.

PERFECT SERVANT by Walt Sheldon (newcomer or pen-name?) is a nice little short. It wasn't a perfect story but very readable which rounded off the issue and made a completely enjoyable magazine this time.

This time, Finlay did a good amount of the pics and he did a very good job. He is getting back to his better style again. I hope he sticks to it now!

Well, good! A letter from a Maine fan this time. And maybe an author-to-be at that! I hope more Maine fans write in. Why you'd think there were few or no science-fiction readers in this state! Letters were all pretty good and all interesting. The ones who keep griping about dull letters should be satisfied this time—all the time.

I can't see anything dull or uninteresting with the letters in any issue. Or maybe I just like to read the letters! Among the best were ones by: Ronald Wagner, (let's see some Wagner-stories now!); Rick Sneary, Philip Gray (another Maine fan), Marion Zimmer and Joseph R. Rhoden, Jr. to name a few.

The Fanzine Review is interesting as usual. Watch for a new one my friend. TRITON is coming your way soon.

On the page opposite the contents page is an ad for the line of Popular Library pocket-size books. It is a constant reminder, when I see one of those ads, of the excellent opportunity you have to put out inexpensive anthologies and collections of science fiction from the many, many old *Wonder, Science Wonder* and *Air Wonder Stories* and the *Quarterlies*. There must be many a story worth reprinting in all of those magazines and from the rare *Strange Stories*. How about some debate and talk on this idea?

Ahhh . . . at last! A novel length story coming up by one of my favorites, Fredric Brown. It has been too long since I've seen a story from his gifted pen (or typewriter) anywhere. I did see and enjoy one of his mystery stories but I like his stf much better. I'm glad to know he is writing for you now.

Well, I've gone on and on long enough. But it won't be very long now before *Thrilling Wonder Stories* hits the stands and my mailbox and then I'll be here again. So until then, keep cooking up nice contents pages for SS and TWS and I'll keep reading them!—*4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine.*

Evidently a brother act—are there any more of you at that 4 Spring Street address? Nice letter by the way. So you too want POPULAR LIBRARY stf. Well, we'll give it thought. It might be a good thing at that.

Walt Sheldon, as said before in this column, is neither neophyte nor pseudonym. He is an extremely gifted and able author who, we wish sincerely, would send us science-fiction stories more often.

THE CORN BELT
by Wilkie Conner

Dear Editor: It's July in May . . . or so says the cover of the current SS. And if the lovely lass on the cover were on my list, it would be July in January . . . Ah!

The HoF yarn by my favorite scribbler, Hank Kuttner, is a fine story . . . but it also serves to prove just how much Hank has improved in the last decade. This just isn't what one would expect of the Kuttner of today . . . especially after one has read *Call Him Demon* and any of a dozen other Kuttner masterpieces.

Since Marion Zimmer admits she resembles Bergey's favorite model, we know what a luscious lass the lively Astra must be. Were I not a married man for lo, these many years, I would hie myself to Greenbush right pronto to lasso this lass with the punch-drunk typer.

Margaret St. Clair continues to wow 'em . . . I guess I sort of go for her brand of story-telling. And Edmond Hamilton isn't too bad when it comes to slinging the long novels. Guess you have a fair line-up of the top-notchers whene it comes to writers.

Finlay's illo for *"When Earth Lived"* was like the Virgil of old. Made me home-sick for the wonderful yarns that introduced me to the wonderful land of stfism. Though I find that today's yarns have 'em beat —two-to-one! *Box 2392, West Gastonia, N. Carolina.*

We're still trying to pry a picture out of Marion in an effort to put you panting Paganinis out of your misery. Not to mention ourselves.

ANSWER MAN
by John Haliburton Jr.

Dear Ed:—I'm certainly surprised that none of the old timers have yet sent in the correct answer to your little problem of what constitutes the difference between science fiction and fantasy fiction. It's really very simple. If you like the story it's science fiction—if you don't like it it's fantasy fiction. Or vice versa, depending upon whether you like science fiction or fantasy fiction.

The stories in the July *Startling* were about what I expected. Average, run-of-the-mill stories, some I thought good, some I didn't especially like. But the stories as a whole provided the welcome recreation and the occasional impetus to thought that makes the mag worth its purchase price. Which makes it an average, run-of-the mill issue—no masterpieces, no stinkers.

While we're on the subject of the stories printed in *Startling*—why do you print so many letters that do nothing but list the stories and give the reader's opinion of them? While such letters may help you in your editorial duties and might conceivably be of interest to the authors, I expect that ninety percent of your readers find them as uninteresting as I do.

I buy the magazine to read the stories and the occasional interesting letter. If I like a story, I like it and whozises opinion of it isn't going to influence my opinion in the least. Nor will it make me feel badly because I don't agree with him.

It irritates me to have such letters given valuable space. Drop them and print another short story or article in each issue. Or leave the space blank so I can write in my own opinions or any telephone numbers I want to remember.

I intend to buy only one copy of the next issue of *Startling*, so don't print this letter just in hopes I'll buy several copies to send my relatives. (Huh? How's that again? Ed.)

I wish you would come out from behind the anonymity of "The Editor". I can think of only three reasons why you haven't done so. 1st. You're female, fat and fifty and afraid the fans will stop buying the mag if they know it. 2nd. There is no such person as "The" editor, but once a week the office boys adjourn to the nearest bar and perform the editorial duties of the mag. 3rd. "The Editor" is just another pseudonym for Henry Kuttner, who is ashamed to admit he prints so many of his own stories.

In any case the evidence all points to the same thing. That for some reason you're ashamed or afraid to have people know that you edit the mag. Personally I think that you're doing a reasonably good job of it. But, if you don't want your name connected with the job, give it up and get a job you can be proud of.

Our town needs a garbage collector.—*Allen, Oklahoma.*

We're writing the Allen garbage collection commissioner in the morning, John. Actually, while we pack plenty of poundage, we are neither female nor even close to fifty and are known to plenty of fans, organized and/or otherwise. We are not Hank Kuttner, though we know him reasonably well despite his insistence on living in far Laguna. Seriously, we prefer editorial anonymity, and shame has nothing to do with it.

HAMILTON'S PEAK
by Tom Pace

Dear Editor: I have read only two stories by Hamilton that equalled—not surpassed—VALLEY OF CREATION. One was his FORGOTTEN WORLD, a year or so ago, in TWS, I believe. This novel is in the same tradition, if not the same vein. I like this, the same kind of story as Merritt's METAL MONSTER and Hammond's VALLEY OF THE FLAME. This story—in case you are getting confused. I'm back to VALLEY OF CREATION again—is an idea combining of fantasy and science-fiction. Also it's long enough really to tell a story, which is a natural and pleasant result of increasing the size.

Kuttner's WHEN THE EARTH LIVED is a good picture of HK's early style. Up till now, about the earliest Kuttner I had read was a 1941 novelet from TWS, entitled THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT. That, while far from as polished as his present writing, was several notches above WHEN THE EARTH LIVED. But the guy was a genius in 1937 and he's one now. Any dissenters?

I liked McDowell's REALITIES UNLIMITED. E. M. can not only write most satisfying adventure-fantasy tales, but can handle a smooth yarn like this it seems—or maybe he's just progressing. Probably.

L. Ron Hubbard bows back into Stf in a very nice manner. What makes a story like this stand out? It isn't the idea, which is not a new one in Stf (I know, I know, what is? .). I think it is just the pure brilliance and smoothness of Hubbard's writing. And, incidentally, it has a good moral . . . you can't push people.

Like the title, the ending of Walt Sheldon's PERFECT SERVANT is perfect. Surprisingly better than the rest of the yarn . . . I went back and read the story again, solely on the strength of those closing paragraphs. It was better the second time, too. Most things are.

Unlike some of the fans, I think Finlay is a little better now than he was before the war. I suggest that you get Bok. Where is he now, anyway?

Since I wrote that last letter, I have been picking up records here and there, mostly off of used-records counters. With me now, I have only fourteen . . . my latest acquisition in an Asch Record by Jerry Jerome, a highly pleasing arrangement of Sigmund Romberg's "When I Grow Too Old To Dream." Do not be fooled by the name of the song if you haven't heard that disc . . . !

One thing I want to know . who the heck is Wally Weber? So HK has "all the writing ability of a two-year-old moron", eh? And Wes Long writes like he is suffering from a hole in the head? Weber, you should collect such a hole . . . or live so long a two years! You, by the way, write like a character out of one of VIP's cartoons.

Miss Zimmer, I *know* what my home-town cop would say if I announced that I was being persecuted by Martians. Said cop is a lanky man of little patience.

All in all, this was a pretty good issue. As which one isn't, these days?—*1720 SW 11th St. Miami.*

Why, thank you Tom. Stepping up the old pace a little in our favor, *n'est-ce pas?* Why not send W. Weber one of Don Cox's collapsible A-bombs? You seem in a mood for such action when HK's literary reputation and merits (ouch!) are challenged.

Hey—this is some sort of record. All these letters and not a single bit of verse. We're beginning to think you epistleers operate on some sort of alternating current where rhyming is concerned.

OH-OH—HERE'S ONE!
by Gary Boyd & J. N. Wickenden

Dear Editor: As we are only 12 and 13 years old, we have not read your mag for a number of issues, that is, all the issues before 1945. We still like it, however, as witness the latest issue. We present opinions on:

THE COVER: It was not as good as some others. How could that BEM (Blue Eyed Maiden) get her dress torn so much in just the right places (three guesses—Ed.)? I don't think the protoplasmic earth did that! Even the old covers by Frank Paul were better than that. Give it 5½/10.

THE VALLEY by World Saver Hamilton. We liked its idea, but this was not handled well. Give Hamilton 6¾/10 (our average mark) and a jug of xeno for a good try.

REALITIES UNLIMITED: How could an earthman deprevide of his senses perceive something of which he had no idea? It poses a problem. H. G. Wells said it couldn't be done in his "Men like Gods." McDowell says it can be done. Who can tell, really? 7½/10.

WHEN SHADOWS FALL: An unexceptional plot was put into a good setting and treated like a masterpiece, and so came out all right. The shadow lettering of the title showed good sense, adding an interesting note. We differ widely on this story, our average mark for it being 6½/10.

WHEN THE EARTH LIVED: Not Kuttner's best. He can write good STF—witness Sword of Tomorrow, etc., etc. Why didn't he? But don't discontinue the HoF, please. We do not think the buildings would move, either, because whether a thing is alive or dead its atomic and molecular structure does not change. Therefore, if steel was given life, why should its chemical structure change to allow it movement? The story is worth 6½/10.

HARD LUCK DIGGINGS: Good work! We hope Jack Vance can keep up his Magnus Ridolph series to this standard. 8/10.

QUIS CUSTODIET . . .?: A very excellent story. Mrs. Saint Clair's best to date. Keep it up! 8/10.

PERFECT SERVANT: A letdown. It might have been humor, or it might have been serious, but as it was, it wasn't much. 6/10.

THE PIX: Keep Finlay, don't overwork him though. Fire Napoli: he's worse than the late terror Marchioni. Also; When we look at a story of scientifiction, we don't want to see Boy and Babe kissing, as P. 9, or unclothed girl, as P. 93. OK?

Roy Wagner: What is SFT? Slightly Fried T-bone? Some Funny Tragedy? Sizzling Futurian Trash? *And* who cares, if it's good stuff?

Capt. Slater: SOMA. Edmond Hamilton called it a medicinal drug to kill pain. An overdose could start a craving. It is also the name of the old Hindu God of Wine.

WHY and HOW can GHOTI spell FISH? That is hard to take; but you're right; it can happen!

In closing, a pome, or rime or what ever this is:

In this letter we've been writing,
We have not been very slighting.
So we hope that we'll be publish'd
And not, like most, just merely rubbished.
But if we're not, then we will merely
Try again. We're yours sincerely.—37 Fulton Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario.

When you lads get down to rhyming
What you write us needs quick-liming
Especially that "rubbished-published' stuff
So when next you're poetasting
You will find your time you're wasting
If you send us any more such awful guff.

Okay, kids, thanks. It's all in fun.

LETTER FROM LINDA
by Linda Bowles

Dear Ed: I eagerly hand the mag dealer my hard earned money, race home, flop into the nearest comfortable chair, get cozy and turn to TEV to see who is what this issue. I come to the end and still no letter from me. I got gypped, I tell ya! I wanna recount—or sumpin'. Probably, TEV was better without my letter, I dunno.

The cover this ish was—ah—was—er, let's skip it. That sounds better than what I was going to say anyway. I get kinda tired complaining all the time about some little thing that isn't worth it.

Sitting here sipping my buttermilk (they say it's good for ya), I summed up this ish as a darn good one. Even made my buttermilk taste pretty good and a story has to be good to do that.

Hamilton's THE VALLEY OF CREATION was superb, swell and all that there kind of stuff. Have you got any more coming up that will be as good as it was? If you have, I'll send you one southern fried chicken leg, slightly gnawed, for your troubles. No kidding, that *was* a good story.

The shorts this trip were all good and I can't understand it. Must be something wrong somewhere. Usually, there's at least one bad one, but this time you came through with a perfect issue. Get up off the floor I didn't mean to pat you on the back that hard. O.K. I'm sorry.

The HoF was good too. More praise to you and your gang.

I see that my idol, Finlay, was a busy little bee this issue. Wonderful Oh, heck, I can't find much of anything wrong this time. I'm slowly going to sleep so maybe I'd better call it a day. Goodnight and watch out for those Martian nightmares. I hear they are terrible.—*931 N. Jackson, Topeka, Kansas.*

What put you to sleep, Linda—the stories or the buttermilk? Please answer at once to put an end to our suspense.

JAMES TO EDMOND—OVER
by James E. Hamilton Jr.

Dear Editor: Wow! Edmond Hamilton's done it again. VALLEY OF CREATION is a superb story. In fact, I can't recall having ever read a better one. There were certain resemblances to the Keith Hammond masterpiece, VALLEY OF THE FLAME, but the story treatment was far different and the resemblances were in no way obstrusive.

The supporting cast of stories was also good this time, especially the L. Ron Hubbard story, WHEN SHADOWS FALL. It starts off somewhat like Hamilton's FORGOTTEN WORLD, but is that bad?

Sometimes you come up with a good Hall of Fame story and WHEN THE EARTH LIVED is one of them. So, on the chance that some other old stories merit reprinting, I would say keep this department. Granted some of the reprints are not too favorably received—I've seen plenty of Hall of Fame stories that I didn't like. But that isn't the point. The point is that if there is enough demand for them to cause them to be selected for reprinting, they must have something that causes somebody to like them.

QUIS CUSTODIET? by Margaret St. Clair is a rather unusual piece of writing to say the least. It deals not alone with mutations, but with a sterile earth and the combination is a readable off-trail story.

PERFECT SERVANT by Walt Sheldon is another story worthy of comment. Somewhere in the forgotten years I have read something that concerned a man grown tired of living, a man who sought only to return to the breast of the mother of all men, Earth. The ending of this story expresses that same idea, the desire that is actually the basic desire of all men, whether they realize it or not, the desire to escape from the responsibilities of life.

Our is a race grown tired, dragging out a tedious existence on a world grown old. We have lost the primal love of living that impelled our first antecedents. And a merciful God is letting us destroy that existence in our own way, that from the ruins may come a new race, a race that will profit by our mistakes.

REALITIES UNLIMITED and HARD LUCK DIGGINGS were only fair stories. They have good ideas, but the possibilities are not effectively explored.

I had more to say, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was, so I will close this and get it out of the way.—*Hartwick, New York.*

Well, you managed to pack in quite a bit, Jymes. If your antipentultimate paragraph is any criterion, baby, how you must hate yourself in the morning. As for us—we love life. You might try it sometime, along with much of the rest of humankind. It's not necessarily painful. Seriously, James, a good and thoughtful letter.

PINUP PROBLEMS
by Wally Weber

Dear Tortured Soul: This cover business must stop. Do not argue, knothead, it *must* stop! Bergey's seductive (happy, Don?) fems have caused the defacing of a number of my *Startling* collection because of their influence on one of my roommates. This character insists on displaying Bergey babes on the walls of our residence with utter disregard for the publications they decorated.

This display has no advertising value due to the removal of such "superfluous" material as the name of the publication and the titles of the lead stories. For the sake of all that is xplgnjk, do something about this deplorable situation. If you cannot change Bergey's detrimental ways, at least suggest a solution. Incidentally, I can not consider destroying this roommate—he pays too much of the rent to make such action economically sound.

Another gripe. Why does everyone scream "escape velocity" the instant space travel is mentioned? What are the people going to do, shoot the ships out of a cannon? I thought stuff like that died with Jules Verne. Given the power and the patience, a craft could travel to the moon at a constant speed of one mile per hour. Somebody in the crowd have a spacer and twenty-seven years to spare? We could prove this thing.

How about this Sneary with his stf UNO? Can you imagine a world with a government of fans? Oh, *brother!* Legal reports would be undecipherable what with phonetic spelling, Sneary spelling, and stf jargon. Important decisions would hinge on how Kuttner handled a similar situation in his latest novel or the views of the moron editor of *Gush and Gore Space Slush.*

High officials would be investigated immediately should a suspicion arise that they were involved in the latest Slaver Mystery, speculated in the magazine market or wrote a letter to a letter column questioning the intelligence of the readers. Confusion would no doubt reign when a high political position would be given to a fan on the basis of exceptional popularity in fandom, and said fan would turn out to be the ten year old member of the Gluck County Loony Coop. No, it is a nice dream, but that is about all.

I think this letter should end about here. Do you know where I can find a typewriter that knows how to spell, punctuate and write correct grammar? Set one of your geniuses to work on it, it would be a worthy invention—*5253 18th N.E., Seattle 5, Washington.*

We can only offer you one suggestion in your coverless-mag dilemma—why not put dust jackets on our magazines. Then, surely, you will have no further trouble keeping your magazines undismembered. Try it.

UNCERTAIN
by Mrs. E. W. DuVall

Dear Editor: I've written you before (I think) but have never found my letters published (If you wrote 'em to us—Ed.). But no matter—as long as I get my magazine I'm satisfied. I really love to read TWS. Especially I enjoyed QUIS CUSTODIET? by Margaret St. Clair in your July issue.

I would like some information if you don't mind giving it to me. With whom should I get in touch to find out about certain metals. I would like to know if there is a metal capable of resisting intense heat and intense pressure. And so on. I shall appreciate hearing from you very much.

By the way, have you heard of the German rocket that will go some 80,000 miles per hour (No—Ed.)? So long for now.—*5611B MacArthur, McLaughlin Heights, Washington.*

Suggest you get in touch with SCIENCE SERVICE, 1719 N Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C. They have all sorts of information and should be able to tell you whatever you want. Let us know how you come out.

AMEN!
by Michael Wigodsky

Dear Sir: So I pick up the latest issue of Startling I give a start and almost drop the horrible thing. Bergey has blotched. Startling is dead, long live Startling.

Still, the contents page looks pretty good. So, of all things, I *read the stories.* Some of them I like. I'm going to tell you which ones.

Hamilton's novel was pretty good and above Hamilton's general level. But John Taine and others of the Society of the Frequently Plagiarized won't like it!

Emmett McDowell actually wrote a good story. Of course, Sturgeon and Simak and a few others have presented the solipsistic theme around which this tale is built much better, but McDowell is not Sturgeon or Simak. As I don't like his stories for one of your competitors (one of the ones that can't compete), I was pleasantly surprised by this story.

Hubbard wrote a good story and, although it is not as good as some of his stories, it is certainly better than the last novelet he wrote for your "most respected competitor". However, I *don't* think that Collingsby and his men would have helped them like that. Why *should* they help a few old fools who happened to live on the dying mother-planet?

Kuttner's "classic" was fairly good but I'm sure that, if you looked, you could find better stories than these for your reprints. CASmith, Taine, Farley, Weinbaum, Keller, Campbell, Ernst, Bond, Miller, Gallun, Williams, Williamson and many others all wrote fine stories for Wonder Stories and the early Thrilling Wonder.

It is true that you have republished stories by some of these, but never their better stories. I do *not* think that the HofF should be abolished. I do think that *you,* Mr. Editor, should display more taste and selectivity in choosing the "classics."

Jack Vance, a good author who has not been too careful about his story ideas, has presented another well written but badly plotted story. But at least it's better than having a "SPACE PIRATES! Goodie!" tale.

Margaret St. Clair has a good tale with one basic weakness. Mrs. St. Clair, if the Blownups were so logical, (and, by the way, what's wrong with that?), why did they destroy all life? Didn't they realize that soon they would have no food? Maybe they weren't so logical after all!

Walt Sheldon, whoever he may be, contributed a nice but extremely implausible story. I didn't care much for it.

Then the illustrations. The Finlays weren't too good, except for the one for the McDowell story. Also the Hubbard pic, which I didn't realize until this moment was also by Finlay. Napoli did well on the Sheldon tale, but his picture for St. Clair's little joke like it.

For the benefit of David Lesperance, I *didn't* "claim was sabotage. Who did the one on page 102? I didn't that a story with 'babbling brats' in it was hopping on the Bradbury bandwagon". I *did* claim that the "screaming children" (that's what *I* said) were like those in Bradbury's stories. They were. And, in some ways, they were better. So there!—*7744 Ridgeland Avenue, Chicago 49, Illinois.*

Come up and see us sometime, Michael, and learn a few of the editorial facts of life. We hope, however, that recent and future HoF selections, thanks to increased elbow room, come closer to meeting with your stipulations. The art department has gone to lunch in a body, so we can't find out who did the job on 102 of the July issue. But since you didn't care for it . . . .

POEM NO. TWO
by Frances Keysor (rhymes with miser)

Dear Editor: Now comes the time to tear the July issue apart. The cover? Why doesn't Bergey try for a little more simplicity? Why did he have to put all the Los Angeles Civic Center and half of her two million, five hundred thousand some odd population on the cover? *And* the inevitable blonde.

The stories:

The Valley of Creation was just so-so. But it brings to mind a subject I have had repeated arguments about. Do animals think? I contend that to think, speech or the knowledge of a language is necessary. Try to think of/on a subject without mentally using words. Don't confuse this with mental images. It is not the same thing. Animals may associate certain words with certain things, but to think—NO.

The HOF story I liked. It also is about one of my favorite thought subjects. Is our universe just an atom in a vaster something? Has anyone ever hazarded a legitimate guess? I mean like Earth with one moon, Mars with two moons etc. their similarity to chemical equations, the revolving around the sun; the master movement through space, etc. Whoa! I had better back up! This is getting too deep for me.

The Perfect Servant was good. It shouldn't have ended so soon. And that brings us to your editorial comment, some issues back, on humor in science fiction. May I say at this very, very late date that my all time favorite SF story was "The Kid From Mars." I definitely like an occasional touch of humor.

Yes, all the stories were good except, in my opinion, Quis Custodiet? and When Shadows Fall. Both were a little too much on the icky side.

As usual, I read TEV first. I was a little disappointed this time that there were no masculine digs at the stupidity of the femme fans. I was all set to blast at someone. Foo! Once, under the influence of a few slugs of xeno, I explained the Einstein Theory to a pretty intelligent gentleman friend of mine and he swears it's the first time any one ever made him understand it. Gosh, I'd like to have a copy of what I said. I'd like to know what it's all about, myself!

The illustrations? Finlay—always Finlay. (What's wrong with that? Ed.).

I had a novel experience the other day I'd like to pass along to the fans. There were six of us in a car riding on the outskirts of Santa Ana, Calif. in a section planted mostly in lima beans. The ground was fresh tilled and the beans were not high enough to green the landscape. We were going north.

Ahead, and off to the right, I saw a lake where no lake should be. I called the others' attention to it. A mirage. Suddenly across the phantom lake came two huge, speeding spheres, traveling with the motion of a balloon rolling on the floor. We watched them with no idea what they were. As they approached the edge of the mirage, they elongated, became ovoid, and emerged in their true shape. Two autos traveling on a highway that bisected ours at a right angle. We had witnessed a rare phenomenon indeed, a mirage superimposed on moving reality.

And now, Dear Ed., for you a poem. I call it a sonnet from the future to the fans of today.

Metropolis of alabaster hue—
Tier on tier, yet high and ever higher,
As tho to touch the stars you would aspire—
The dream of long-dead fans at last come true!
The white glare of the rocket blast is old;
Man is no more a hapless fledgling bird—
From star to star his reckless laugh is heard
Yet even as the ancient writers told.
Time is a well worn rut to travelers now;
Backward they go or fore with equal ease—
Pleasure in time-or ether, if they please!
To you, oh fans of yore we take a bow.
Do future paths still hold a binding spell?
Ah, read OUR science-fiction, it will tell!

Yaaaaah, try that on your piccolo. I'm eagerly awaiting your poetic reply!—*7108 Albany St., Huntington Park, California.*

Oh, Snerdly on the portestan begow
As Mankind through the starways winds his dream
And fanzine poetasters let off steam,
And wildness is paradise enow.
E'en as they did in Sergeant Saturn's day
With verse that sometimes scans, more often not,
With bludg'ning wit that's truly not so hot,
From one poor editor knocking the whey.
Time's well-worn rut they travel, yes indeed
But frantically as they back and fill
Seeking the prize of perfect pleasure still
Their senses lulled by golden-cupp-ed mead
Lacking the power to speak a needed word
They still will that hapless fledgling bird.

UNTAINTED (?) AUTHORS
by R. F. Dykeman

Dear Sir: I heartily approve your current policy of using new, untainted authors, as witness the July ish. Many of the names were unfamiliar to your pages—but they brought original ideas and refreshing narration with them. That's the trouble with so many veteran "hacks." They become stale and began to wallow in a self-made rut. Hoorah for new entertaining writers!

STORIES . . . "Realities Unlimited" may very well prove to be the most original conception of alienness yet dreamed up by S. F. writers. It's first in the ish with me.

"Hard Luck Diggings" . . . do we smell a new episode-character here? Good. Three cheers for J. Vance.

Miss St. Clair . . . just for fun why don't you do a story that is readable beyond the opening sentence? Can't YOU do it?

"Perfect Servant" is next. A very, very nice humorous tale. A new author (to me anyway).

Valley of Creation and all the rest of the lot came under the heading—"par for the course" . . . with methinks the possible exception of H. K.'s, which was slightly better.

Looking forward to a long reading friendship with S. S.—*R. D. #5 Glenside, Ithaca, N. Y.*

That ain't no policy, Mr. Dykeman. It's just the efforts of the Editor to put the best possible combination of stories together in every issue. Yes, the Vance-Ridolph opus is first in a series we hope to be running for many, many issues to come. Sheldon, as already mentioned in this peristyle, is far from a new hand, however. Ditto Vance—but both men can turn out a very neat story indeed, given half an inspiration.

COLE SORES
by Les & Es Cole

Dear Sir: I looked at Es and said, "Honey, suppose we *did* have a time machine; then I could really determine whether Homo saps is a lower Pleistocene form without wading through a bunch of papers in the Library." So I sat down and typed, " 'Duration is an attribute of consciousness and not of the plenum. It has no *ding an sicht*. Therefore—' "

"Don't bother with it," a voice said, "It's a lot of utter hogwash anyhow."

I turned slowly, the hair on my head standing normal to the scalp surface. But it was only Es standing in back of me. "Don't be such a jerk," she said, "There never was, there isn't now and there never will be such a thing as the 'time machine.' "

My stf blood boiled and with a supercilious air I asked, "And why not, my pet?"

"Look, we believe in something akin to Seabrook's fan-shaped destiny, *n'est-ce pas?* We're not fatalists, are we?" she asked rhetorically. "Well, given an infinite number of futures (Someday I'll get Es to explain what she means by "infinite number"—Les) for each infinitely small time interval since the earth's beginning, several or even an infinite number of these futures *must* already have developed time machines. That is, according to the laws of probability. Am I right?"

"Yes," I said, slightly snowed.

She continued, "And with an infinite number of time machines someone, again by the laws of probability, would be bound to visit this time span and reveal himself to us. But no one has. Therefore, time machines never have, aren't now, and never will be an actuality. Q. E. D."

Something is wrong with Es' argument, but wot?

The stories this month stack up as follows:

1. When Shadows Fall. L. Ron is head and shoulders above the rest of the pack.
2. Valley of Creation. Not stf, but readable.
3. Realities Unlimited. Just nosed into 3rd place, but nearly as bad as the rest.

We've a few comments about "Realities Unlimited". This apparently falls into the "author-in-love-with-own-voice" department. What did McDowell mean by the oft repeated "gravel Peneplain"? Since the story took place in an arid clime, he may have meant "pediment" for "gravel peneplain", but we doubt it. We *insist* that McDowell define his terms; we challenge him to a debate on peneplains. *And*, just what did he mean by collecting fossils under the conditions existing at that time? Fossils, per se, are meaningless. They are only important when related to lithology, time, and space. Before collecting fossils one would find it expedient, nay, necessary, to have the area carefully mapped topographically.

And to you, Dear Editor, we also thumb our collective noses. What's the big idea of cutting our funniest remarks? We think the fans are old enough to read such words as "foetus" or "oedipus complex". Gad, sir, the letters you must have killed!

A final word—by the time this sees print there'll be a brand new addition to the family. A nice, bright, shiny diploma will go up on the wall next to mine. It's Es' coming out party? After four years she did it! Esther Cole, A. A., B. A., and does anyone need a quack psychiatrist? Seriously, the male half is pretty proud of the female. She did have to work for it.—*2901 Grove St., Berkeley 3, California.*

In a post scriptum to the above the Coles inform us that they are heading for parts East come this month. Can they see us? Of course, but could they ever? Seriously, as one foetal (get that, Coles) ape to a couple of others, we'll be delighted. Call us when you hit town.

We're advising Emmet "Peneplain" McDowell to say nothing at all. You "insist"—eh? As to the loophole in Es' time machine argument, what proof do we have that the Earth hasn't been visited by futurebeings? Prophets, da Vincis and the like. Granted it's hogwash but it's a lot of fun speculating and you can never quite be sure.

PRAISE FOR HAMILTON

by David C. Wilmot

Dear Editor: I realize I'm a bit late in writing but you doubtless know that a student has other things on his mind these days. Even so I had to take a moment to praise Ed Hamilton's July novel. The man has really matured (in a literary sense) in the past year. Of course he was writing fine stories before I was born, but with "Transuranic" in the Feb. TWS he finally escaped from the conventionality which often

[*Turn page*]

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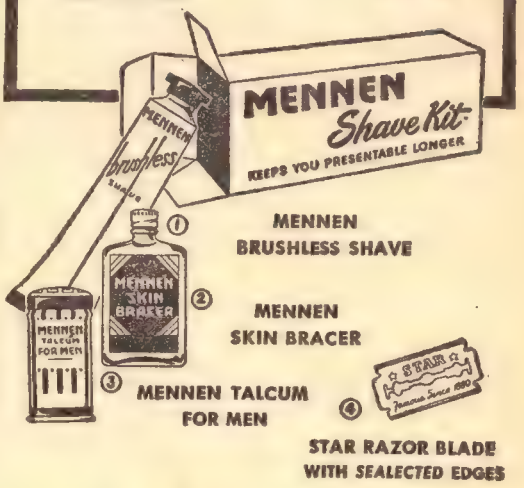

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seemed to hold him down in the past. And now in "Valley of Creation" Hamilton has truly blossomed out as an adult, literate, purposeful writer.

Perhaps a comparison with "Star of Life" will bear out my point. The latter was an engaging romance and made enjoyable reading, but it didn't state anything new or meaningful. On the other hand, the newer novel is not only a model of beautiful, effectively-simple writing, but it conveys a message as well, one which cannot be repeated too often. Such well-integrated allegory is all too rare in science fiction. A literature which exists solely as entertainment can never rise to great heights.

The novel impressed me so much that I'll pass over the cover, except to mention that it is undoubtedly the worst Bergey within the range of my experience. After his promising work on the last TWS too. Well, I suppose we can't have everything and other appropriate clichés. The interiors were satisfactory though.

You asked for comments on the HoF, so why not mine? All things considered it's a worthwhile feature, although the Weinbaum and Hamilton stories are the only ones of late that I consider classics. Publishing longer stories ought to help, and you might use newer ones. The mass of your readers shouldn't object to the reprinting of some of your earlier stories.

No doubt you will get enough comments on the letters without mine, but I for one would rather read Wigodsky than prattling females and overeducated extroverts picking on minor scientific errors which any interested parties can discover for themselves. Don't get the impression that I don't enjoy constructive scientific discussion, however. I'm all for it.

In conclusion: bring back Heinlein and de Camp, by hook or by crook; get a novel from C. L. Moore; give us lots of Bradbury, Brackett and Sturgeon. But then, how much can I expect for twenty cents?—*Countyside Lane, Kirkwood 22, Missouri.*

We'll do the best we can, David, on all the fronts you mention. It is our believe, several times stated, that the Hall of Fame is due to show marked improvement thanks to the lifting of restrictions on same. Hamilton's recent development is remarkable, especially after so many years of steady high-caliber work.

WHO'S A SCHMOE?
by Jerri Bullock

Hi Schmoe: Thanks to you, TEV, for the free plugs! We needed them; and we got wonderful results.

Say, St. Clair really made *Quis Custodiet* a story. Has she ever thought of writing novelets for TWS & SS? Even a novel, mayhaps? I'd like to see some of her *serious* work.

Good ol' Cap Future's boss-man. It's the first time in stf history this kid has read the novel first, instead of starting with TEV and reading from back to front. Something about it, though (there'd have to be with me around), I'd like to point out.

Very specifically we are told that "black & white" is the order of the day when Eric is the wolf-dog. Then how did he know the "calaboose" was green glass, etc.? (Please send my $64.00 to the address below.) You know I wouldn't be happy with nothin' to pick at, so forget it. Anyway, it wasn't written in the first person.

That's the only thing I can think of to criticize, the rest of the mag being almost perfect. Or in the slang-widge of today, *I'm for it!* How do you like it "Fan-Artisan", or did you receive your copy?

I haven't nominated a "best illo" for a long time it seems to me. Being an amateur artist, I'm afraid to stick my neck out. But here I go: Finlay's "it"—the one on page 15. About 9/10ths of this issue's drawings are by Virgey, so I just picked the best of the lot. I'm partial to horses anyway. *Adios, muchacho.—22200 Lemon Ave., Hayward, Calif.*

The answer to the green glass is simple. Somebody told him it was green. Now you send me $64.00—okay? We'll look for FAN-ARTISAN when doing the 'zine review tomorrow. See you on horseback—but you won't see us on same if we can help it.

OUT OF THE LIBRARY
by Shelby Vick

Dear Ed: After a long—*too* long—pause, I'm back again. Even if this letter goes into the wastebasket with the others, I'm still bound to write it. Got the urge again.

To begin at the beginning, Bergey's cover. Not even worth an exclamation point. Doesn't even properly illustrate the story. Now he had a pretty good one on March. Why not keep that up. E. B.? (At least, I can say one thing for it; no BEM's, or space-suited heroes.) My favorite Bergey, by the way, was the one illustrating—again, improperly—Other Eyes Watching.

For TEV: Like the idea on fan clubs. Just wish you'd been able to dig up one from Florida. (How about it, Floridians? A club, maybe?)

The Valley of Creation, by Ed Hamilton: Man, oh man! World-buster is leaving the world alone for a change. (Poor Terra; she sure needs the rest.) Instead, he's turned out a fantasy that ought to rate way, way up there—maybe even as far as Vega. Darn good characterization, logical events, just about everything.

Of course, it had a predictable end, but I enjoyed reading the way that Ed brought said end about. Finlay's illustration was good, too—I'd have liked it even if she was buttoned up. The one on page fifteen kinda struck a wrong note, but okay, still.

Now, to reverse myself. No more, please. At least, no more than one or two a year. I read SS for stf, nothing more—same goes for TWS. I can read fantasy in other mags. And if you make a habit of putting them in, even those that are like TVOC, you'll find you're encouraging the worse ones to slip in. I'd much rather have my stf.

Realities, Unlimited, by Emmett McDowell: More like this. Good enough characterization. (I'm always a sucker for those mental stories.) (No snide remarks, Ed., ole boy.) Finlay's illustration didn't go.

When Shadows Fall, by L. Ron Hubbard: Ron got in good emotional atmosphere there, and I liked his way of characterization. Somehow, his characters seemed more like characters in a legend. Good. More. Also, I liked Virg's rocket ship. And the type the title was set in.

When the Earth Lived, by Henry Kuttner: Why, oh why did you have to reprint this? Up until this time, I had been thinking of Hank as an excellent author, had never read one of his I didn't admire, at least. Then you drag this out.

It would have been improved, if the youngster that was with the girl hadn't been in the story. But with him there, the hero just uns and takes the girl away from him. Oh, no. The jerk ought to have challenged him to live rocks at twenty paces, or something. But what does he do? He smiles, and conveniently fades into the background. Blaaaaah! Not even good enough to reach the moon.

Oh, well; maybe that was the one bad one that I guess all authors have in them. Let's hope so, and that Hank gives us no more like this. (Really, he had a good situation. I'd have thought Kuttner could have worked it up better than that.)

Hard Luck Diggings, by Jack Vance: The last two paragraphs or so ruined it. For some reason, it reminded me of Holmes saying, "Elementary, my dear Watson," and also gave the idea that the writer had his cheek stuffed with tongue.

Quis Custodiet? by Margaret St. Clair: Her Oona stories don't go over so well with me—maybe because there's a gal from the past in Alley Oop called Oola, and here la femme St. Clair comes along with a gal in the future called Oona, just a couple of letters ahead. (The middle letter, m, standing for the present.) Anyhow, Q. C. I *did* like; a few rather different versions of old ideas. And those quotation titles get me.

The Perfect Servant, by Walt Sheldon: Y'know, I think there's a moral there somewhrere. But the only really good characterization in it was the perfect servant—he didn't have but one character trait to build up, so should be easy. However, J. Gamble will pass.

But that gal that always called him up, and seemed so interested in money, and then jilts him for someone with less, claiming she's in love. (Oh, well; maybe she had finally decided she couldn't suit him. In fact, that *nothing* could!—I couldn't resist that.

Next comes the best of all. Oh, you say, but that's all the stories. Who cares about the stories? I agree with some of the others, at times—the others that think you ought to leave stories out sometimes and have nothing but letters.

What would we talk about, then? Why, each other, of course. Also, past stf stories. (If you'd care to sponsor something like that, I'd be glad to take care of the printing; mim, that is.)

R. Wagner; interesting, but wrong. I prefer greatly stf. No connect.

Cap Slater was interesting.

Sneary knows good stories; what he said about C. of T. W. and Pink House. Like to say much, much more, but no room.

Print, huh? Thanx.—*Librarian, Panama City, Fla.*

Your idea sounds suspiciously like one of those FAPA mailings—with all the fans talking to each other—some of them, of course, talk to themselves (couldn't resist *that* one ourselves.). And if Oona reminds you of Oola in Alley Oop, why not give up your comic strip or switch to another paper?

BASHFUL!

by Dorothy Tuner Canova

Dear Editor: This is my first . . . my very first fan letter, and I feel a little shy. Timid, perhaps, is the word. You see, I do not consider myself a dependable critic, and the only remarks I can possibly make are: I like—I *no* like. However, very few of your S. S. stories land on my "no-like" list, and I especially relish reading "The Ether Vibrates".

Liked your cover pic on the July issue. The symmetrical blond, the melting city, and all the horror-stricken people being swept away by 'that there stuff'. Earle really outdid himself.

Some of your letters were interesting. One Ronald Wagner has really been researching! When he completes his "practice work" and gives out with a story (and I'll be watching) he has himself a reader!

Three cheers for Eddie Hamilton for his "The Valley of Creation" . . . Knocked out! Into this not unbelievable fantasy he has expertly woven myth, romance and the very, very unusual.

"Realities Unlimited", by Emmett McDowell was definitely oxygen for this critter. I predict a sequel. What say, Mac?

"When Shadows Fall", by L. Ron Hubbard. The meaning was clear, but the gait was slow.

"When the Earth Lived", by Henry Kuttner . . . *SENSATIONAL!*

"Hard Luck Diggins" by Jack Vance . . . an imaginative piece of work. Anyway I *like* trees. Threw my hatchet away years ago.

"Quis Custodiet" by Margaret St. Clair . . . *De gustibus non est disputandum.*

"Perfect Servant" by Walt Sheldon. What a weird sense of humor! I'm still dangling!

There it is, and by now you should agree that I am not a critic. Anyway, it's been fun, and I will be happy when the next issue comes out.

For the past two months or so I have been working on a two-generation novel. When (and if) my book

[*Turn page*]

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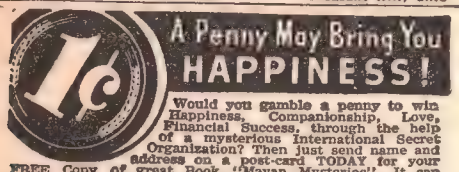

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is published, I intend to devote more time to short stories. Who knows? Perhaps someday I shall have cleared all barriers (meaning my brain) and will have written a story worthy of S. S. mag!—*251 Paxton St., Paterson 3, N. J.*

Luck with your novel, Dorothy, and thanks for writing. Also thanks for liking our magazine.

RAVE SHAMPOO
by L. Crimmins

Dear Editor: Rave notices are in order for the July ish of SS. Yes, every story in the mag was good. Oh, of course, there were some extra special ones like Valley of Creation, but uummmmm. Keep it up and more of the same.

The one incongruous note in the entire mag was—THE COVER—Yep, I did not like the cover. Too lurid—the young lady, seemed to be running from a maniac judging from the general appearance she presented. Course it fitted in with the story, but in such a way.

Valley of Creation of course took first honors with me, Realities Unlimited was a close second, Quis Custodiet, the first story I really enjoyed by M. St. Clair, was third, and the rest were really enjoyable.

The interior illos were wonderful especially the first one on page nine by Finlay—he's my favorite.

I won't send a poem, 'cause I have no sense of meter, but I must say I enjoy the poems you write most of all, probably because of my warped sense of humour—no offense intended.

I am writing all STF magazines cause I have noticed a dearth of letters from the southern part of our country, and I am endeavoring to determine the cause. Doesn't anyone down South like Science Fiction?—*1682 N. Broad, New Orleans, La.*

Sure an' there've been a number of fans from your neck of the woods, Crimmins (is that Mr., Miss or Mrs.?) Perhaps the printing of your letter will bring a number of mousetraps on the path to your door. We hope so and let us know the results, if any.

UNIVERSAL THEORIES
by L. Leon Shepherd

Dear Editor: Here's that man again. You're not pleased? You will be—read on. I think this issue—July, is the best I have seen in ages. I even liked St. Clair. Can you imagine that—from me?

"The Valley of Creation" is the sort of story I thought you had quit publishing—mainly, because you couldn't get them anymore. Wonderful!

The H of F was a Godsend to me. I remembered reading it before, after the second paragraph. But I am still grateful for it as I shall explain:

The theory of the Universe being a part of a larger atomic structure and the relative difference in time of the greater being, in comparison to our conception, had always stuck in my mind. I had forgotten where I had originally been indoctrinated with the idea. I should have guessed—it was Kuttner.

Before I go on, let me take just one little dig at St. Clair. I thought she had the best story I have seen from her to date. But why must she use names such as "Quis Custodiet" and "Kynnastor?" Hasn't she learned not to underrate SF readers? Why don't you give her a hint that most of us, including the ones you so nicely got me acquainted with, read GOOD reading—whether it be SF pulp or the Bible?

TEV: You know something? I liked it, as usual, even though I wasn't in it. Yes I was too—thanks to Billie Lee Randolph—bless her heart. (Billie, the L.L. stands for L(eon); referring to my ancient age.) Some of your contributors are poets and don't know

it. I mean—Reeeaally! Of course, they can't hold a candle to you, ole thing, because you can answer them all.

Now to get serious about the section; particularly Ronald Wagner's letter. First; let me say I admire his style of writing. He did an exhaustive piece of work on the subject he chose. However, I want to make a few remarks I think he could have added but didn't. He tied relaxation, escape and magic all in with "Wonder" as the average Fan's reason for reading SF and Fantasy.

He should have separated it in this manner: A; The average story is read for relaxation. B; If it has a good plot with "magic" it isn't boring. C; When he finally gets one with some true 'W'onder" in it, such as "The Valley of Creation", it goes into a class by itself, and ceases to me SF, Fantasy or whatever. It becomes a classic, or literature if you prefer, and is what the old time, serious reader is looking for and seldom finds.

"WONDER" is what caused Columbus to discover America; man to fly; invent the Atom Bomb and generally get himself out of a cave. Although the same thing may put him back into one, or worse. When I find a story with genuine "Wonder" in it, it causes me to wonder why in h— some of our Government and Church leaders don't read some of these works and ponder the ideas they find therein.

They are, in my opinion, a lot more sensible than some of the so-called, world-saving schemes they have tried and are still trying from time to time. Honestly, some of the truly "Wonder" stories I have read lead me to wonder if the authors of these theories are not "Voices crying in the wilderness."

Perhaps, I have said the same thing that Wagner said. But, if I did, I was not very clear on the subject and, perhaps, others were not also. All of our authors may be trying for "Wonder", but tying a SF or Fantasy label onto a story doesn't endow it with "Wonder" by quite a long way, in my opinion. Unless it would be to wonder why he bothered to write it.

Webster's Collegiate, puts Wagner's interpretation, of Hamilton's meaning of "Wonder" third. Namely: "The *emotion* excited by novelty, or by something strange or not well understood; astonishment." First preference is given to: "A *cause* of surprise or astonishment; a marvel; *prodigy.*" Prodigy—same source: "An omen; a sign." (Voice crying in the wilderness.)

Anybody want to argue about it?—*204 East Ryder St., Litchfield, Ill.*

Not us, L-for-Leon. The business of relative time and size *is*, to this editor, one of the outstanding demonstrations of the dimensional quality of time. It was also one of the reasons that lay behind our selection of the Kuttnerepic for reprinting in the July, SS, HALL OF FAME.

Why bigger things live longer than small ones we don't know. It seems to us that the cycle might well work in reverse—perhaps in some other universe. Any authors reading the above are perfectly free to knock their brains out trying to put some variation on this theory into fiction form. We'll just stand by and chuckle as we pass out the rejection ships. Seriously, there should be story in it somewhere—one that has yet to be written.

HE SHER KHAN
by Paul F. Anderson

Dear Editor: Venetian blinds of Mowgli, George the boy who lived with the animals and the Brookfield Zoo, but Edmond Hamilton Sher Khan go 69 pages on a little inspiration, can't he? The Valley of Creation is

[*Turn page*]

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no sally of elation. Phooey to drunken heroes, Mata Hari heroines and flea-circus plots. *Attendez!*

'Twas a stern little dictum of Kree's:
When the Brotherhood scratched and had fleas,
He'd run out like crazy
And crush him a daisy
And sprinkle Pyrethrum, and sneeze.

When the Earth Lived is Kuttner's way of falling into the hands of his detractors, and the editor's way of lousing up a somewhat rakish and blowsy Hall of Fame. Strictly oompah-oompah stuff.

Realities Unlimited, in which McDowell links brains like sausages, is potluck with a strawberry-shortcake finish. What would S-F do without that convoluted skull-skill stuff? Without it we're all just Kree's Brotherhood aeons ago—that's a long, long slime ago.

Quis Custodiet is no Kosto diet and St. Clair treats words with quiet passion and with much sense. The twist-ending, of humanity placing a *deliberate* check on humanity, was Corona-Corona. Do you Havana more like this?

When Shadows Fall is Hubbard, and adequate. I guess we won't miss Earth-Mother till she's gone.

Hard Luck Diggings is likewise good. Glad you have Vance in your plans.

Perfect Servant is the leavening agent of the issue: humor. Walt Sheldon tacks a wry tail on the tale which raises the eyebrows, stretches the lips, and reveals the teeth. Good!

The Ether Vibrates, like a chorus of violins playing musicians with hack-saws: the Editor, of course, conducting "The Waste-Basket Concerto" by Postman. Bergey plugs the mag fine—his gals are all "startled". The publications review is excellent and unique. I am mailing a "Primer of Versification" to the Editor, whose humor is strained only through the little grey meshes of his startling durability.—*6702 Windsor Ave., Berwyn, Ill.*

"Do you Havena more like that?"
A pun we'll use for filler
But since it is so ghastly flat
We'll have to take Manila.

Close—very close, Paul—but no cigar.

WASSAIL, WASSO

by J. Wasso Jr.

Dear Ed: I don't agree with Gerry de la Ree on Margaret St. Clair. Her wacky future domestic series is delightful! We need something like that in our regular fare of sciencefiction and fantasy, no matter how unusual the latter may be.

Dan Mulcahy: In re your note to Peter Tappan, I would like to say that Lovecraft is one of my greatest favorites but so is Captain Future. (And in radio I enjoy Walter Winchell as much as I do soap operas; and a symphony concert as much as either.) I'm catholic in my tastes, not a purist.

Miss Carey's letter deserves a gold medal.

Jack Clements: More and more letters from femme fans!

Marion Zimmer: An sf-fantasy novel with the heroine as the central character by all means!

Pull-eze Lee make it Billie again!

If TEV letters were all like Mrs. Holder's (not necessarily complimentary, but sane, mature and logical) you could call this department Seventh Heaven.—*119 Jackson Ave., Pen Argyl, Penna.*

We have no arguments with your conclusions, *Herr* Wasso, but not only have we no gold (or any other kind of) medal to hang on Miss Carey but we can't find her letter in

the office copy of SS for July. Maybe in another issue? Please elucidate.

GODSEND
by Jim Leary

Dear Editor: I've just finished reading the July STARTLING. Boy, what an issue! After the recent slump, it was certainly a Godsend. At any rate, here's my opinion of things.

The cover—evidently, this type of cover is what sells the mag and it's what the readers want, so more power to Bergey. Still, those colors could be just a little less glaring.

First place to "When Shadows Fall." I hope to see a lot more of Hubbard in future issues. Now that you're getting authors that are the best in the field, I'd like to suggest van Vogt (We've got him—Ed.). With him, your magazine would be next to complete.

"The Valley of Creation" is next. It reminded me greatly of the *Jungle Books*. In my opinion, Hamilton is the most consistent author in science-fiction. His stories are always good. Only the excellence of Hubbard's story kept this from first place.

"Realities Unlimited" gets third place.

"Hard Luck Diggins"—Do I detect a series?

"When the Earth Lived"—It hurts to put Kuttner down this far, but after all, he wasn't as good then as he is now. If you can't get better Hall of Fame material than this, you'd better drop the feature.

"Quis Custodiet"—Another "after the big war" story.

"Perfect Servant"—No comment.

"All of the stories were better than average this issue. Keep it up.

Now, for the *main* part of the magazine—TEV.

Ronald Wagner—To most people, pseudo-science means the stuff that is published in the Sunday Supplement. In addition they connect it with that "I-have-been-in-the-caves" type of thing. If you wish to be associated with either of these, why then tell people that you like pseudo-science. Personally, you're welcome to my share of both of them.

Rick Sneary—So you want world peace, eh? Let me show you the mistake in that. If the world is at peace it will eventually be united. The central authority would gain more and more power until it controlled everything the people did. Now, the people in charge would try to ban all but the best literature. To most people, science-fiction (being printed on pulp paper) does not come under the heading of good literature or even literature.

Thus, sf would be banned. Think of it! No more STARTLINGs or TWS's. Old Merrittales would be sold under the counter of the local poolhall. The stf authors would have to *work* for a living (Oh no, it's too horrible!). Finlay would be doing drawings for anatomy textbooks. The poor fans would be forced to leave their dens for the open air, and (ugh!) *sunlight*. All of us would be eventually put into concentration camps.

Therefore, I say, "Down with world peace and up with fandom! Arise comrads, the Revolution is at hand!"

Nuff said.

Concerning Captain Future. Wasn't there supposed to be a final story to the series, where Cap would return to Deneb? I for one liked some of the Captain Future stories and although I'm thumbs down on the magazine being brought back. I'd like to see the final story published for old time's sake. You could print the story, and marry off Cap. That would end the series and everyone would be happy. I personally would buy two copies of the mag if you would do it. How's about it ED?

Well, if you print this, I'll be around with more. If you don't, I might write anyway. There, you're trapped!—*4718 Forest Hills Road, Rockford, Ill.*

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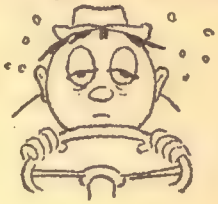

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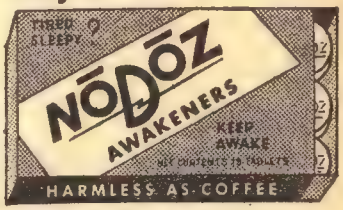

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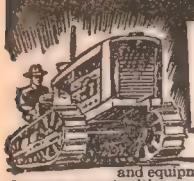

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PALMWAY PREMIER

by Leroy Eastin

Dear Ed: This letter marks my premier effort to any mag of any sort, so please overlook if it sounds sort of amateurish. I guess the first thing to do is to review the crop of stories in the last ish of Startling. Here goes—

All in all, July was a top-notch issue, the stories ranging from fair to excellent. "Valley of Creation" is first. Didn't start off so well, but got a lot more interesting as it went along. Second is "Realities Unlimited", followed by "Quis Custodiet?", a neat story on the post-atomic-war theme. "When the Earth Lived" is next

Couldn't you print a class of story that is a little better for your Hall of Fame? But, I guess you can't please everyone. "When Shadows Fall" was a good mood story. I could imagine just how poor Mankin felt, and the other Earthmen, trying to get aid from the wealthy galactic governments.

"Perfect Servant" comes trailing near the end. By the way, if you hadn't noticed, Tobor, spelled backwards, spells robot. Last of all, comes "Hard Luck Diggings" I've read better and I've read worse. So much for the stories, now for the artwork.

The cover—urp! Nuf said. The interiors were something else again. Let me tell you something. Hang on to Finlay. He's great. Who illustrated "Perfect Servant" and "Quis Custodiet?" Just wondered.

And now for the real purpose of my letter. I've just gotten started in fandom, though I've been reading stf. for quite a while. I'm going to wait awhile before I get really active in fandom until I get the hang of it. But right now, I'm looking for some fan to correspond with and chew the fat with about ye olde stf. I can guarantee answering each letter within a reasonably short time, even though it's only a post card. I can write a good letter when I want to. And, another thing—I put into my letters what I get from my pen pals. If the letters I receive are long, mine will be likewise. All letters are typed too. Where I live, there aren't many people who are sympathetic to my type of literature, so I walk alone in stf. in my neighborhood. I'm in the market for a subscription to a fanzine, too. What do the darn things look like, anyhow?

So, dear editor, if you'd kindly print this letter, I'd appreciate it greatly. You can look to Lake Worth for quite a few letters in the future, and maybe I'll become a second Rick Sneary, or Lin Carter, or something.—*110 South Palmway, Lake Worth, Florida.*

Okay, fans and fanettes, here's a lad waiting for you to get busy. So—get busy.

"BUGGSIE" SEAGULL AGAIN

by Bob Farnham

Dear Ed: My apologies for calling you a bug-heh-heh—no offense was intended, I assure you! I would like to call you something—other than swear-words, that is (Oh boy—I bet I catch it for that one!).

Have just ended the usual session with the July SS. and altho it is too much to hope for another letter in TEV so soon, I have simply got to tell you what a swell story was the Valley of Creation. It has been since way before Cap Future that I have read a story so well-written, so packed jam-full of action, interest and all-too-true-to-life-ness.

I could not put the mag down till I had finished reading it, and I was docked ½ a day's pay for being late to work an hour. Saw the notice by Jim Harmon on Page 6 about the Illinois Science Fiction Fans—that name has been changed to Science Fiction-International and I (a-HEM!) am acting Zine Editor—till the returns on the votes are all in.

Say—want to thank you for the idea re the lapel-buttons. If the idea is adopted, you'll get a button for a look-see. Margaret St. Clair had a really good

story in Quis Custodiet. (Cussed. Oh Diet?) It's her first at serious stuff and is darn good. M-O-R-E, Margeret, M-O-R-E!!

Kuttner's story was good, but not up to some of his works. Dr. Kent was right. It's the same old world. Ain't it. I did not care for the inside illos. Finlay goes in too heavily for the semi-undraped Fems. He could take lessons from Bergey.

And I want to know just *WHOM* Phillip Gray thinks *HE* is—calling Bergey's pics "slushy"? *EH?* Bergey has Finlay skinned 40 ways from the first dip of the brush. Finlay?? *P-T-O-O-I-E!!!!! GIMMIE BERGEY!!!!!* Once again I call attention to the fact that BERGEY HAS ILLUSTRATED A POINT IN THE STORY—something that 99½% of the rest of the artists overlook.

Whether deliberately or not is hard to say. Sorry to know that Astra Zimmer has a bad knee. Her letters really give life to TEV and I hope she doesn't break an arm next. A rapid recovery, Astra!

Hugh Allen—don't fret about trimmed edges. Heh—you'll get trimmed when you get married. And how you will!!

By the way, Ed; seems to me I saw something on a certain Rejection Slip re SS preferring straight STF stuff—what is Valley of Creation if it isn't Fisy?-?-? Tsk. Tsk.

Yes sir! It's the same old world!

You are right! Oh—how right!! Don't *ever* let Brackett and Bradbury even *see* each other! The more stories you can get from those two, the better!

Rex Ward—Got the dime OK—but what happened to you? Lose your pen or your typewriter? Or both? Let's hear from you.

Oh yes—and the cover. It was *good*. Can't any one kick about the Gal's scanty dress under the circumstances in the pic.

Thanks again, Ed., for a swell issue. Hope the next is as good.—*1139 East 44th St., Chicago 15, Ill.*

What we prefer to run in TWS and SS and what we have to settle for are frequently two totally different pots of bouillabaise. When a fantasy comes in that is so darned good we can't afford to let it out of the shop—well, we buy it and run it. But we maybe (and are) hollering long and loudly for more stf.

Well, this brings to a conclusion the longest TEV in history. Hope it suits you-all. It's fun putting the darned thing together anyway. So long for now. We'll be seeing you next month in TWS.

—THE EDITOR.

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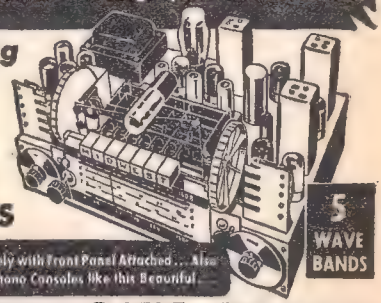

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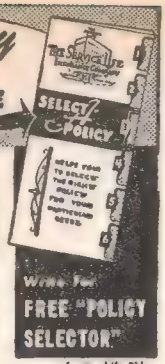

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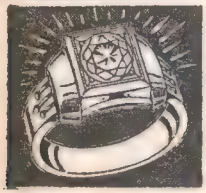

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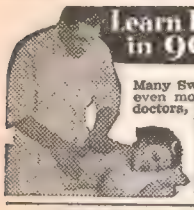

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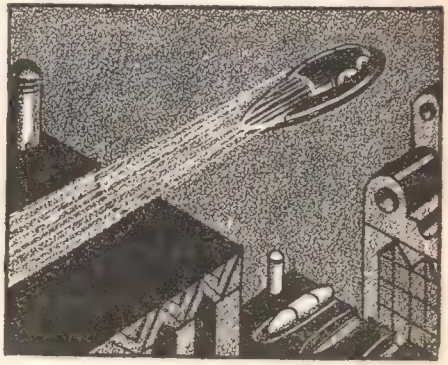
REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

THE best new fanzine in some time appeared on the "market" recently and merits separate review. Entitled THE MOON PUDDLE its inaugural issue was published by Garven Berry, P.O. Box #633, Galveston, Texas, and Chad Oliver, Harper Star Route, Kerrville, Texas. Published irregularly and without charge, it is an hilarious satire on fandom, stf and just about anything else whose soft underbelly tempts the editorial shafts of Messrs. Berry and Oliver.



Dr. Keller has come up with an introduction which is perfectly keyed to the intelligent zanyism of this 38-page 'zine, which includes such travesties as "Simians, Swords and Supermen" by "L. Sprague de Willy," "The Last of the Lensmen" by "Dr. E. E. Jones, Ph.D.," and "Creep, Chaddo" by Chad Oliver himself.

"There is room," says Dr. Keller in his introduction, "to doubt that the astronomical Lovecraft" (Author of the famous MOON POOL) "would not approve of such a nomenclature but . . . this first issue of THE MOON PUDDLE will be a collector's item."

Since only 50 copies have been printed, we suspect that Dr. Keller is right. This is a swell job.

From Francis R. Fears, 6 Ferme Park Mansions, Ferme Park Road, Crouch End N.S., London, England, comes a note regarding an active British fan society. Says Mr. Fears, in part—

The "London Circle" meets at the White Horse

Inn every Thursday evening and the gathering is quite informal, including fans, editors and writers. New fans have told us that the success of the Circle is due to its informality.

We held the first postwar science fiction convention in London this year, attended by more than fifty fans and have published a convention booklet containing reports of the Whitcon and articles on Anglofandom.

During the past three years the London Circle has given active support to "Fantasy Review" and has introduced many newcomers to the American science fiction magazines, which are extremely scarce over here because of the Board of Trade ban. We are running a library, the Cosmos, which is available to all fans.

We are planning next year's convention and hope that any fans interested in the London Circle will address their inquiries to me, Circle Secretary.

Okay, that takes care of the preliminaries. The A-list is fat this time, the B-list thin, but let's at them and away—

ASTRA'S TOWER (Vol. 1, No. 2), R.F.D. #1, East Greenbush, New York, Editor, Marion "Astra" Zimmer. Published monthly, free to contributors.

Somewhat sloppy printing mars this issue, which is otherwise lively, intelligent and quite in the best Zimmer traditions. George Caldwell and Billie Lee Randolph contribute stories, Bill Oberfield heads the article listings with a provocative "Are Science Fiction Fans Crazy?" Ackerman and Thyril Ladd abet the editor in the book-review department and there is, of course, plenty of poetry. Good fun.

CANADIAN FANDOM (No. 15), 118 St. George Street, Toronto 5, Canada. Editor, Beak Taylor. Published quarterly. 10¢ per copy, 3 copies 25¢.

A good big issue of what has come to be one of the steadiest fanzines in the field. A grim note is struck by Alistair Cameron's long article on "Personal Survival in Atomic Warfare"—but a tendency toward such heavyweight subjects as the above and Beak Taylor's geological yawn on mountain growth and "Erotica and Modern Life" by the increasingly ubiquitous Dr. Keller is offset by the usual number of japes and jests to keep light hearted folk in fettle.

FAN ARTISAN (Vol. 1, No. 1), Box #105, Los Alamos, California. Editor unlisted. Published irregularly. 10¢ per copy, seven copies 60¢.

A newcomer put out by a California club calling themselves the Fantasy Artisan Group. Sprightly stuff, well presented by such familiar fanzine names as Ken Brown, Jerri Bullock, John Grossman, Russ Manning and Bill Kroll. Leading article, on "Fantastic Art" is—don't tell us you've guessed it—by Dr. David H. Keller. When does he sleep?

FANOMENA (B), 200 Williamsboro Street, Oxford, North Carolina. Editor, Andy Lyon. Published irregularly, free to FAPA members.

This issue is dedicated to (Oh, no!) Dr. David H. Keller and features a savage satire on the problems of prozine story selling written by him and entitled THE ULTIMATE VICTORY. Also included are a sound essay on "The Arts of Writing" by Dr. Keller, letters on Dr. Keller and his work by August Derleth, Sam Moskowitz, Chad Oliver, Paul Dennis O'Connor, Donald Wollheim, Paul Spencer, Thomas P. Hadley, Andy Lyon and a letter from Dr. Keller himself. The sum of his other contributions to this issue is meagre, including only two short stories, INDEPENDENCE and NONE SO BLIND. We banzai to Dr. Keller.

[*Turn page*]

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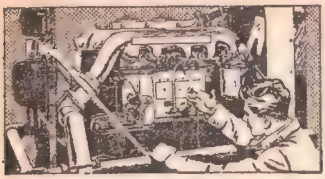

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FANTASY ADVERTISER (Vol. 3, No. 1), 1503¾ 12th Avenue, Los Angeles 6, California. Editor, Gus Willmorth. Published bi-monthly. 10¢ per copy, 50¢ per year.

This photo-offset (Do you get that, Gus?) pocket-sized magazine is far and away the best thing around for collectors and swappers of stf material. Samuel Anthony Pepples with an erudite and informative article on "The Technique of Fantasy Collecting" has the lead editorial spot. Packed tight with dope for fans.

FANTASY REVIEW (Vol. 2, No. 9), 115 Wanstead Park Road, Ilford, Essex. Editor, Walter Gillings. Published bi-monthly. 15¢ per copy, 75¢ per year.

Top British 'zine and one of the best in the field anywhere. This issue is given largely to book reviews but the articles are informative and the fan chatter and prozine reviews by Messrs. Lindsay and Slater are as full of interest to American readers as they are to British. Continued excellence of FR is a heartening signpost on the road to a healthy international stfandom.

FANTASY TIMES (Vol. 3, Nos. 5 & 6), 101-02 Northern Boulevard, Corona, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published monthly. 15¢ per copy, 2 copies 25¢.

About the best newzine currently operating, backed with continuing studies of pro and fanzines alike, as well as books and fanchatter. A must for all fans.

FANTASY COMMENTATOR (Vol. 2, No. 7), 7 East 235th Street, New York 66, New York. Editor, A. Langley Searles. Published quarterly. 25¢ per copy, 5 copies $1.00.

An unusually good issue of the heavyweight of fanzines. Book reviews and poetry (by Joe Schaumberger this time) are up to standard, along with well-researched delvings into old fantastic magazines—but the magazine stands out on three special counts. Sam Moskowitz's immortal Immortal Storm, a history of fandom, hits an unusually lively high, James Warren Thomas has a thoroughly erudite article on the occult authenticity of Bulwer-Lytton and Dr. Keller (Holy if not sacred cow!) comes up with a truly brilliant study of the decadent hereditary background of H. P. Lovecraft which is the most interesting single study we have read about the old master. Fine stuff all the way!

IF! (Vol. 1, No. 3), 705 West Kelso, Inglewood, California. Editor, Conrad Pederson. Published irregularly. 10¢ per copy, 6 copies 50¢.

A bright pocket-sized fanzine, containing the currently inevitable and interesting article by Dr. Keller (sic!), this time on the matter of fiction plots. Also bright prozine notes by Joe Kennedy, a review of Dr. Smith's "Triplanetary" by Don Wilson and stories and articles of varying merit and interest by the Editor, Norm Storer and Don Hutchison.

OPERATION FANTAST (Vol. 1, No. 4), Riverside, South Brink, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, England. Editors, Lt. K. F. Slater & Joyce Slater. Published irregularly. Free.

A voluble and chatty if sloppily printed British fanzine, dominated by Mr. Slater rather than Dr. Keller, who for some reason is not present. John Newman's short fantasy, "The Daemon of Fantasy", has amusing aspects. Plenty of gossip in Slater's articles and departments. Just a fair issue.

SCIENCE FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION (Vol. 1, No. 1), Box A (Employee), Kings Park, Long Island, New York. Editor, Franklin M. Dietz, Jr. Published quarterly. 15¢ per copy.

A well-printed and illustrated offset job, tending heavily to the scientific, with articles on Dr. Steinmetz, development of robot brains and a short piece (with pics) on "Fish Fossils" by Professor John A. Quigly. Sam Moskowitz handles the book reviews. We suspect some of the articles need more meat and fewer pics.

SHANGRI LA (No. 6), Apartment #20, 1116 Georgia Street, Los Angeles 15, California. Editor, Dale Hart. Published bi-monthly. 10¢ per copy, 3 copies 25¢.

Best regular item in this denicotinized version of the club journal of the LASFS is the meeting reports of the Society by Jean Cox, Tigrina's successor. They are gaily malicious as always. Dr. Keller (we surrender) is present with an account of one man's impressions on encountering California fandom more or less head on. Still worth the dime it costs.

SPACEWARP (Vol. 3, Nos. 2 and 3), 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan. Editor, Arthur H. Rapp. Published monthly. 10¢ per copy, 3 copies 25¢.

Two good issues of this sloppily mimeographed 'zine which at last swing it into the A-list category. Radell Nelson's intriguing "A Fan Looks at Bradbury" in the May issue is matched in interest by June stories and fact pieces from the typewriters of Wrai Ballard, Editor Rapp, T. T. Huneycutt, Redd Boggs, Donn Brazier and Vaughn Greene. Not the best on the list by a long shot by a much improved fanzine.

SPARX (Vol. 2, No. 1), 75 Sparks Street, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts. Editor, Henry M. Spelman 3d. Published quarterly. 10¢ per copy.

This is the 'zine that contains the other letter

[*Turn page*]

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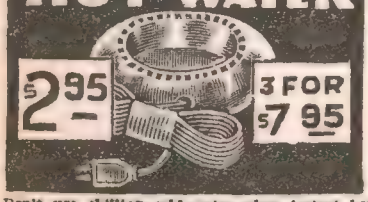

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'STARTLING Was Afraid to Print"—which, from the pen of Dave Thomas, consists in a mild blast at Henry Kuttner's "The Mask of Circe" (SS, May, 1948) for being "derivative" from one of the Merrittales. We'd probably have run the letter if we had got it. The rest of the book is alert if sophomoric—with nothing outstanding to note.

THE FANSCIENT (Vol. 2, No. 2), 3435 NE 38th Avenue, Portland 13, Oregon. Editor, Donald B. Day. Published quarterly. 15¢ per copy, 4 copies 50¢.

An impressive offset job, both for content and art, but one whose semi-pocketbook size makes for rather hard reading. Waible and Berry do the best of the artwork and a self-profile, along with an excellent photograph, by Jack Williamson, noted stf author, headlights the printed matter. Well worth the price of an 8-power reading glass.

THE MUTANT (Vol. 2, No. 2), 22180 Middlebelt, Box #384, Farmington, Michigan. Editor, George Young. Published bi-monthly. 10¢ per copy, 50¢ per year.

Messrs. Nelson, Rapp, Groover, Singer and Boggs take over in this organ of the Michigan Science Fantasy Society, with Genevieve K. Stephens handling the poetry assignments in her usual gifted style. A lengthy and complex piece in which the gentlemen listed above treat each other as Bems is probably more amusing to their own groups than to the general reader.

THE SYDNEY FUTURIAN (No. 8), 160 Beach Street, Coogee, Sydney, NSW, Australia. Editor, Graham Stone. Published irregularly. 3d per copy.

A slim but thoughtfully constructed little fanzine from Down Under, mostly of member interest despite a "Salute to the Torcon" which shows commendable enterprise. Australian fandom is just getting going and can use encouragement.

TRITON, 505 Washington Avenue, Apt. 7, Portland, Maine. Editors, Edmund Cox & Russell H. Woodman. Published quarterly. No price listed.

A newcomer, neatly printed but with poor artwork. A good article on Australian fandom by Vol Molesworth high-spots this issue, which does not quite fulfill the avowed literary intentions of its editors. However, this is a new entry in the fanzine field and may well pull together in an issue or two.

TYMPANY (Vol. 2, No. 1), 514 West Vienna Avenue, Milwaukee 14, Wisconsin. Editor, Robert L. Stein. Published biweekly. 5¢ per copy, 6 copies 25¢.

Along with Fantasy Times the best newszine currently operating. A must for fans who want to know what is going on in their field of activity.

Yes, a long A-list. And a mighty good one. Now for the B's—

OTHER WORLDS (Vol. 1, No. 3), 3401 6th Avenue, Columbus, Georgia. Editor, Paul Cox. Published bimonthly. No price listed. Contains reviews and fanswap information—as is only fitting for this direct descendant of the KAY MAR TRADER.

REJECT (Vol. 1, No. 1), 548 North Dellrose, Wichita 6, Kansas. Editors, Telis Streiff & David Dee McGirr. Published irregularly. No price listed. A fittingly titled and very messy item.

SPEARHEAD (Vol. 1, No. 1), 817 Startling Avenue, Martinsville, Virginia. Editor, Thomas H. Carter. Published irregularly. Free on request. An ambitious

'zine with A-list possibilities if developed. Don Wilson, W. C. Butts, Tom Carter, Leslie Hudson and others are chief contributors to a lively issue which includes an attack on an unnamed editor we sincerely hope is not ourselves.

SUNSHINE (No. 3), Route #4, Somerville, New Jersey. Editor, Lloyd Alpaugh Jr. Published irregularly. No price listed. Personal stuff by the editor, mostly for the benefit and amusement of his friends.

STFANATIC (Vol. 1, No. 2), c/o YMCA, Warren, Arkansas. Editor, Hugh McInnis. Published irregularly. No price listed. A pocket sized job with a bit of everything in it, some of it moderately amusing. Art Rapp contributes a couple of pieces and the editor has a page of mathematical tricks which help it a bit.

THE ROCKET NEWS LETTER (Vol. 1, Nos. 17 and 18), 91 Pine Street, Riverside, Illinois. Editor, Wayne Proell. Published monthly. 15¢ per copy, $1.50 per year. This magazine is no longer the pretentious journal it was for some years—but it still packs plenty of dope for rocketaddicts.

VALHALLA (Nos. 4 and 5), 1724 Mississippi Street, Lawrence, Kansas. Editor, Norm Storer. Published irregularly. No price listed. The self-styled "Magazine of Young Fandom" is fighting a valiant fight for survival in the face of resignations of many of its officers and as such deserves to be forgiven its shortcomings.

Well, that's that for this issue. All in all, a fine lot of amateur publications, even if some recent big ones seem to be among the missing. We'll be looking forward to the next issue and hope you are the same.

—THE EDITOR.

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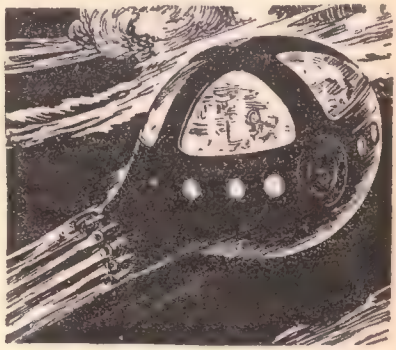
REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

STRANGE PORTS OF CALL, 20 Masterpieces of Science-Fiction, selected by August Derleth, Pellegrini & Cudahy, Inc., 65 Fifth Ave., New York 3, N. Y., $3.75.

A well mounted and well conceived anthology of Stf which begins with "The Cun-



ning of the Beast" by Nelson Bond and concludes with Philip Wylie's "Blunder" and Ray Bradbury's "The Million Year Picnic."

"It is not by coincidence," explains Mr. Derleth in his forward, "that *Strange Ports of Call* begins with a memorable allegory, in science-fiction terms, on the creation . . . and that it should end with two stories of the earth's destruction. . . Between them is a miniature history of mankind and a glimpse of his future in terms of science-fiction."

Longest story is H. P. Lovecraft's study of antarctic horror, "At the Mountains of Madness," a treatment of terror and "alien" archeology which, for all of its occasional wordiness, is highly effective. Lord Dunsany is present with "Mars on the Ether" as are Robert Heinlein with "The Green Hills of Earth," Theodore Sturgeon with "Thunder and Roses" (mighty grim going that one), A. E. van Vogt with "Far Centaurus" and the late H. G. Wells with "The Crystal Egg."

It is, all in all, a remarkable selection of science fiction writing of this and yesteryear and, among its other names are Dr. David H. Keller, Donald and Howard Wandreis, Harry Stephen Keeler, Frank Belknap Long, George Allan England and Fritz Leiber Jr.

Henry Kuttner is present with the memorable "Call Him Demon," which appeared in our companion magazine, THRILLING

WONDER STORIES, and two of our own Hall of Fame tales are included, "Master of the Asteroid" by Clark Ashton Smith and "Forgotten" by Schuyler Miller, which appeared in STARTLNG STORIES as "Forgotten Man of Space."

A must for fandom.

•

TRIPLANETARY, By Edward E. Smith, Ph. D., Fantasy Press, Reading, Pennsylvania, $3.00.

Probably the most interesting concept which Dr. Smith has yet put into print. Instead of following the adventures of an Earth juvenile or two or six through the far reaches of distant planets as he did in the "Skylark" series or in "Spacehounds of IPC," he has developed a history of the world, past, present and future, in terms of a conflict between two groups of super-beings, Arisians and Eddorians, the former noble creatures, the latter as malevolent as malevolent can be.

With Arisian support mankind is constantly building up some sort of civilization, only to have the Eddorians, for well defined reasons of their own, sow within mankind itself the seeds of its own destruction. In the light of this superhuman conflict we see Atlantis rise and fall, Ancient Rome ditto and the rise and fall of our current civilization. All of these jobs are cunningly fitted into history past and present and World War Two is well conceived although the book was written back in 1932.

Thereafter, story, conflict and all, takes off into space and the conflict of the superbeings is joined with a species from a different and distant planet, the submarine Nevians, complicating things for humans and superhumans alike. The science fiction concepts are superb and Dr. Smith, as always, is at his very best in delineating "alien" types and behavior.

So vast is the canvas on which he paints and so absorbingly and rapidly does his story move through the cosmos that the weakness of his human characters is well subordinated—which is a good thing for they have, one and all, a sort of Baden-Powell naivete that is the story's only weakness.

Despite this one flaw, a very good bet.

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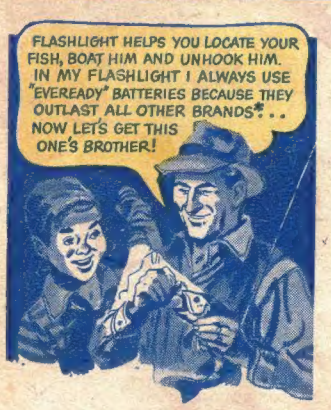

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